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*Astounding*

# SCIENCE FICTION

JULY



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## Contents

### *Serial*

- NULL-ABC . . . H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire 2  
(Part one of two parts)

### *Novelette*

- NIGHTMARE BROTHER . . . . . Alan E. Nourse 41

### *Short Stories*

- CRUCIFIXUS ETIAM . . . . . Walter M. Miller, Jr. 30
- FOR THE GLORY OF AGON . . . . . Irving Cox, Jr. 54

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--- MONDAY, JULY 20th ---

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# NULL-ABC

By H. BEAM PIPER and  
JOHN J. McGUIRE

*FIRST OF TWO PARTS. There's some reaction these days that holds scientists responsible for war. Take it one step farther: What happens if "book-learnin'" is held responsible?*

CHESTER PELTON retracted his paunch as far as the breakfast seat would permit; the table, its advent preceded by a collection of mouth-watering aromas, slid noiselessly out of the pantry and clicked into place in front of him.

"Everything all right, Miss Claire?" a voice floated out after it from beyond. "Anything else you want?"

"Everything's just fine, Mr. Harris," Claire replied. "I suppose Mr. Pelton'll want seconds, and Ray'll probably want thirds and fourths of everything." She waved a hand over the photocell that closed the pantry door, and slid into place across from her brother, who already had a glass of fruit juice in one hand and was lifting platter covers with the other.

"Real eggs!" the boy was announcing. "Bacon. Wheat-bread toast." He looked again. "Hey, Sis, is this real cow-made butter?"

"Yes. Now go ahead and eat."

As though Ray needed encouragement, Chester Pelton thought, watching his son use a spoon—the biggest one available—to dump gobs of honey on his toast. While he was helping himself to bacon and eggs, he could hear Ray's full-mouthed exclamation: "This is real becomb honey, too!" That pleased him. The boy was a true Pelton; only needed one bite to distinguish between real and synthetic food.

"Bet this breakfast didn't cost a dollar under five C," Ray continued, a little more audibly, between bites.

That was another trait; even at fifteen, the boy was learning the value of money. Claire seemed to disapprove, however.

"Oh, Ray; try not to always think of what things cost," she reproved.

"If I had all she spends on natural

food, I could have a this-season's model 'copter-bike, like Jimmy Harnett," Ray continued.

Pelton frowned. "I don't want you running around with that boy, Ray," he said, his mouth full of bacon and eggs. Under his daughter's look of disapproval, he swallowed hastily, then continued: "He's not the sort of company I want my son keeping."

"But, Senator," Ray protested. "He lives next door to us. Why, we can see Hartnett's aerial from the top of our landing stage!"

"That doesn't matter," he said, in a tone meant to indicate that the subject was not to be debated. "He's a Literate!"

"More eggs, Senator?" Claire asked, extending the platter and gesturing with the serving knife.

He chuckled inwardly. Claire always knew what to do when his temper started climbing to critical mass. He allowed her to load his plate again.

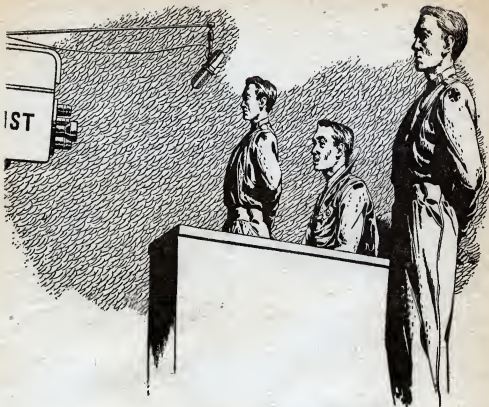
"And speaking of our landing stage, have you been up there, this morning, Ray?" he asked.

They both looked at him inquiringly.

"Delivered last evening, while you two were out," he explained. "New winter model Rolls-Cadipac." He felt a glow of paternal pleasure as Claire gave a yelp of delight and aimed a glancing kiss at the top of his bald head. Ray dropped his fork, slid from his seat, and bolted for the lift, even bacon, eggs, and real becomb honey forgotten.

With elaborate absent-mindedness, Chester Pelton reached for the switch to turn on the video screen over the pantry door.

"Oh-oh! Oh-oh!" Claire's slender hand went out to stop his own. "Not till coffee and cigarettes, Senator."



"It's almost oh-eight-fifteen; I want the newscast."

"Can't you just relax for a while? Honestly, Senator, you're killing yourself."

"Oh, rubbish! I've been working a little hard, but—"

"You've been working too hard. And to-day, with the sale at the store, and the last day of the campaign—"

"Why the devil did that idiot of a Latterman have the sale advertised for to-day, anyhow?" he fumed. "Doesn't he know I'm running for the Senate?"

"I doubt it," Claire said. "He may have heard of it, the way you've heard about an election in Pakistan or Abyssinia, or he just may not know there is such a thing as politics. I think he does know there's a world outside the store, but he doesn't care much what goes on in it." She pushed her plate aside, poured a cup of coffee, and levered a cigarette from the Readilit, puffing at it with the relish of the morning's first smoke. "All he knows

is that we're holding our sale three days ahead of Macy & Gimbel's."

"Russ is a good business man," Pelton said seriously. "I wish you'd take a little more interest in him, Claire."

"If you mean what I think you do, no thanks," Claire replied. "I suppose I'll get married, some day—most girls do—but it'll be to somebody who can hang his business up at the office before he comes home. Russ Latterman is so married to the store that if he married me too, it'd be bigamy. Ready for your coffee?" Without waiting for an answer, she filled his cup and ejected a lighted cigarette from the box for him, then snapped on the video screen.

It lit at once, and a nondescriptly handsome young man was grinning toothily out of it. He wore a white smock, halfway to his knees, and, over it, an old-fashioned Sam Browne belt which supported a bulky leather-covered tablet and a large stylus. On the strap which crossed his

breast five or six little metal badges twinkled.

"... Why no other beer can compare with delicious, tangy, Cardon's Black Bottle. Won't you try it?" he pleaded. "Then you will see for yourself why millions of happy drinkers always Call For Cardon's. And now, that other favorite of millions, Literate First Class Elliot C Mongery."

Pelton muttered: "Why Frank sponsors that blabbermouth of a Mongery—"

Ray, sliding back onto the bench, returned to his food.

"Jimmy's book had pictures," he complained, forking up another mixture of eggs, bacon, toast and honey.

"Book?" Claire echoed. "Oh, the instructions for the 'copter?"

"Pipe down, both of you!" Pelton commanded. "The newscast—"

Literate First Class Elliot C. Mongery, revealed by a quick left quarter-turn of the pickup camera, wore the same starched white smock, the same Sam Browne belt glittering with the badges of the organizations and corporations for whom he was authorized to practise Literacy. The tablet on his belt, Pelton knew, was really a camouflaged holster for a small automatic, and the gold stylus was a gas-projector. The black-leather-jacketed bodyguards, of course, were discreetly out of range of the camera. Members of the Associated Fraternities of Literates weren't exactly loved by the non-reading public they claimed to serve. The sight of one of those starched, perpetually-spotless, white smocks always affected Pelton like a red cape to a bull. He snorted in disdain. The raised eyebrow toward the announcer on the left, the quick, perennially boyish smile, followed by the levelly serious gaze into the camera—the whole act might have been a film-transcription of Mongery's first appearance on the video, fifteen years ago. At least, it was off the same ear of corn.

"That big hunk of cheese," Ray commented. For once, Pelton didn't shush him; that was too close to his own attitude, at least in family-breakfast-table terminology.

"... First of all; for the country and

especially the Newer New York area, and by the way, it looks as though somebody thought somebody needed a little cooling off, but we'll come to that later. Here's the forecast: Today and tomorrow, the weather will continue fine; warm in the sun, chilly in the shadows. There won't be anything to keep you from the polls, tomorrow, except bird-hunting, or a last chance at a game of golf. This is the first time within this commentator's memory that the weather has definitely been in favor of the party out of power.

"On the world scene: You'll be glad to hear that the survivors of the wrecked strato-rocket have all been rescued from the top of Mount Everest, after a difficult and heroic effort by the Royal Nepalese Air Force. . . . The results of last week's election in Russia are being challenged by twelve of the fourteen parties represented on the ballot; the only parties not hurling accusations of fraud are the Democrats, who won, and the Christian Communists, who are about as influential in Russian politics as the Vegetarian-Anti-Vaccination Party is here. . . . The Central Diplomatic Council of the Reunited Nations has just announced, for the hundred and seventy-eighth time, that the Arab-Israel dispute has been finally, definitely and satisfactorily settled. This morning's reports from Baghdad and Tel Aviv only list four Arabs and six Israelis killed in border clashes in the past twenty-four hours, so maybe they're really getting things patched up, after all. During the same period, there were more fatalities in Newer New York as a result of clashes between the private troops of rival racket gangs, political parties and business houses.

"Which brings us to the local scene. On my way to the studio this morning, I stopped at City Hall, and found our genial Chief of Police Delaney, 'Irish' Delaney to most of us, hard at work with a portable disintegrator, getting rid of record disks and recording tapes of old and long-settled cases. He had a couple of amusing stories. For instance, a lone Independent-Conservative partisan broke up a Radical-Socialist mass meeting preparatory to a march to demonstrate in Double Times Square, by applying his



pocket lighter to one of the heat-sensitive boxes in the building and activating the sprinkler system. By the time the Radicals had gotten into dry clothing, there was a, well, sort of, impromptu Conservative demonstration going on in Double Times Square, and one of the few things the local gendarmes won't stand for is an attempt to hold two rival political meetings in the same area.

"Curiously, while it was the Radicals who got soaked, it was the Conservatives who sneezed," Mongery went on, his face glowing with mischievous amusement. "It seems that while they were holding a monster rally at Hague Hall, in North Jersey Borough, some person or persons unknown got at the air-conditioning system with a tank of sneeze gas, which didn't exactly improve either the speaking style of Senator Grant Hamilton or the attentiveness of his audience. Needless to say, there is no police investigation of either incident. Election shenanigans, like college pranks, are fair play as long as they don't cause an outright holocaust. And that, I think, is as it should be," Mongery went on, more seriously. "Most of the horrors of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries were the result of taking politics too seriously."

Pelton snorted again. That was the Literate line, all right; treat politics as a joke and an election as a sporting event, let the Independent-Conservative grafters stay in power, and let the Literates run the country through them. Not, of course, that he disapproved of those boys in the Young Radical League who'd thought up that sneeze-gas trick.

"And now, what you've been waiting for," Mongery continued. "The final Trotter Poll's pre-election analysis." A novice Literate advanced, handing him a big loose-leaf book, which he opened with the reverence a Literate always displayed toward the written word. "This," he said, "is going to surprise you. For the whole state of Penn-Jersey-York, the poll shows a probable Radical-Socialist vote of approximately thirty million, an Independent-Conservative vote of approximately ten and a half million, and a vote of about a million for what we call the Who-Gives-A-Damn Party, which, frankly, is the party

of your commentator's choice. Very few sections differ widely from this average—there will be a much heavier Radical vote in the Pittsburgh area, and traditionally Conservative Philadelphia and the upper Hudson Valley will give the Radicals a much smaller majority."

They all looked at one another, thunder-struck.

"If Mongery's admitting that, I'm in!" Pelton exclaimed.

"Yeah, we can start calling him Senator, now, and really mean it," Ray said. "Maybe old Mongie isn't such a bad sort of twerp, after all."

"Considering that the Conservatives carried this state by a substantial majority in the presidential election of two years ago, and by a huge majority in the previous presidential election of 2136," Mongery, in the screen, continued, "this verdict of the almost infallible Trotter Poll needs some explaining. For the most part, it is the result of the untiring efforts of one man, the dynamic new leader of the Radical-Socialists and their present candidate for the Consolidated States of North America Senate, Chester Pelton, who has transformed that once-moribund party into the vital force it is today. And this achievement has been due, very largely, to a single slogan which he had hammered into your ears: *Put the Literates in their place; our servants, not our masters!*" He brushed a hand deprecatingly over his white smock and fingered the badges on his belt.

"There has always been, on the part of the Illiterate public, some resentment against organized Literacy. In part, it has been due to the high fees charged for Literate services, and to what seems, to many, to be monopolistic practices. But behind that is a general attitude of anti-intellectualism which is our heritage from the disastrous wars of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries. Chester Pelton has made himself the spokesman of this attitude. In his view, it was men who could read and write who hatched the diabolical political ideologies and designed the frightful nuclear weapons of that period. In his mind, Literacy is equated with '*Mein Kampf*' and '*Das Kapital*', with the A-bomb and the H-bomb, with concentration

camp and blasted cities. From this position, of course, I beg politely to differ. Literate men also gave us the Magna Charta and the Declaration of Independence.

"Now in spite of a lunatic fringe in the Consolidated, Illiterates' Organization who want just that, Chester Pelton knows that we cannot abolish Literacy entirely. Even with modern audio-visual recording, need exists for some modicum of written recording, which can be rapidly scanned and selected from—indexing, cataloguing, tabulating data, et cetera—and for at least a few men and women who can form and interpret the written word. Mr. Pelton, himself, is the owner of a huge department store, employing over a thousand Illiterates; he must at all times have the services of at least fifty Literates."

"And pays through the nose for them, too!" Pelton growled. It was more than fifty; and Russ Latterman had been forced to get twenty extras sent in for the sale.

"Now, since we cannot renounce Literacy entirely, without sinking to *fellahin* barbarism, and here I definitely part company with Mr. Pelton, he fears the potential power of organized Literacy. In a word, he fears a future Literate Dictatorship."

"Future? What do you think we have now?" Pelton demanded.

"Nobody," Mongery said, as though replying to him, "is stupid enough, today, to want to be a dictator. That ended by the middle of the Twenty-first Century. Everybody knows what happened to Mussolini, and Hitler, and Stalin, and all their imitators. Why, it is as much as the public fear of Big Government as the breakdown of civil power because of the administrative handicap of a shortage of Literate administrators that is responsible for the disgraceful lawlessness of the past hundred years. Thus, it speaks well for the public trust in Chester Pelton's known integrity and sincerity that so many of our people are willing to agree to his program for socialized Literacy. They feel that he can be trusted, and, violently as I disagree with him, I can only say that that trust is not misplaced."

"Of course, there is also the question, so often raised by Mr. Pelton, that under

the Hamilton machine, the politics, and particularly the enforcement of the laws, in this state, are unbelievably corrupt, but I wonder—"

Mongery paused. "Just a moment; I see a flash bulletin being brought in." The novice Literate came to his side and gave him a slip of paper, at which he glanced. Then he laughed heartily.

"It seems that shortly after I began speaking, the local blue-ribbon grand jury issued a summons for Chief Delaney to appear before them, with all his records. Unfortunately, the summons could not be served; Chief Delaney had just boarded a strato-rocket from Tom Dewey Field for Buenos Aires." He cocked an eye at the audience. "I know Irish is going to have a nice time, down there in the springtime of the Southern Hemisphere. And, incidentally, the Argentine is one of the few major powers which never signed the World Extradition Convention of 2087." He raised his hand to his audience. "And now, until tomorrow at breakfast, sincerely yours for Cardon's Black Bottle, Elliot C. Mongery."

"Well, whattaya know; that guy was plugging for you!" Ray said. "And see how he managed to slide in that bit about corruption, right before his stooge handed him that bulletin?"

"I guess every Literate has his price," Chester Pelton said. "I wonder how much of my money that cost. I always wondered why Frank Cardon sponsored Mongery. Now I know. Mongery can be had."

"Uh, beg your pardon, Mr. Pelton," a voice from the hall broke in.

He turned. Olaf Olafsson, the 'copter driver, was standing at the entrance to the breakfast nook, a smudge of oil on his cheek and his straw-colored hair in disorder. "How do I go about startin' this new 'copter?"

"What?" Olaf had been his driver for ten years. He would have been less surprised had the ceiling fallen in. "You don't know how to start it?"

"No sir. The controls is all different from on the summer model. Every time I try to raise it, it backs up; if I try to raise it much more, we won't have no wall left on the landing stage."

"Well, isn't there a book?"



"There ain't no pictures in it; nothing but print. It's a Literate book," Olaf said in disgust, as though at something obscene. "An' there ain't nothin' on the instrument board but letters."

"That's right," Ray agreed. "I saw the book; no pictures in it at all."

"Well, of all the quarter-witted stupidity! The confounded imbeciles at that agency—"

Pelton started to his feet. Claire unlocked the table and slid it out of his way. Ray, on a run, started for the lift and vanished.

"I think some confounded Literate at the Rolls-Cadipac agency did that," he fumed. "Thought it would be a joke to send me a Literate instruction book along with a 'copter with a Literate instrument board. Ah, I get it! So I'd have to call in a Literate to show me how to start my own 'copter, and by noon they'd be laughing about it in every bar from Pittsburgh to Plattsburg. Sneaky Literate trick!" They went to the lift, and found the door closed in their faces. "Oh, confound that boy!"

Claire pressed the button. Ray must have left the lift, for the operating light went on, and in a moment the door opened. He crowded into the lift, along with his daughter and Olaf.

On the landing stage, Ray was already in the 'copter, poking at buttons on the board.

"Look, Olaf!" he called. "They just shifted them around a little from the summer model. This one, where the prop-control used to be on the old model, is the one that backs it up on the ground. Here's the one that erects and extends the prop."—he pushed it, and the prop snapped obediently into place—"and here's the one that controls the lift."

An ugly suspicion stabbed at Chester Pelton, bringing with it a feeling of frightened horror.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

Ray's eyes remained on the instrument board. He pushed another button, and the propeller began swinging in a lazy circle; he pressed down with his right foot, and the 'copter lifted a foot or so.

"What?" he asked. "Oh; Jimmy showed me how theirs works. Mr. Hartnett got

one like it a week ago." He motioned to Olaf, setting the 'copter down again. "Come here; I'll show you."

The suspicion, and the horror, passed in a wave of relief.

"You think you and Olaf, between you, can get that thing to school?" he asked.

"Sure! Easy!"

"All right. You show Olaf how to run it. Olaf, as soon as you've dropped Ray at school, take that thing to the Rolls-Cadipac agency, and get a new one, with a proper instrument board, and a proper picture book of operating instructions. I'm going to call Sam Huschack up personally and give him royal hell about this. Sure you can handle it, now?"

He watched the 'copter rise to the two thousand foot local traffic level and turn in the direction of Mineola High School, fifty miles away. He was still looking anxiously after it as it dwindled to a tiny dot and vanished.

"They'll make it all right," Claire told him. "Olaf has a strong back, and Ray has a good head."

"It wasn't that that I was worried about." He turned and looked, half ashamed, at his daughter. "You know, for a minute, there, I thought . . . I thought Ray could read!"

"Father!" She was so shocked that she forgot the nickname they had given him when he had announced his candidacy for Senate, in the spring. "You didn't!"

"I know; it's an awful thing to think, but— Well, the kids today do the craziest things. There's that Hartnett boy he runs around with; Tom Hartnett bought Literate training for him. And that fellow Prestonby; I don't trust him—"

"Prestonby?" Claire asked, puzzled.

"Oh, you know. The principal at school. You've met him."

Claire wrinkled her brow—just like her mother, when she was trying to remember something.

"Oh, yes. I met him at that P.T.A. meeting. He didn't impress me as being much like a teacher, but I suppose they think anything's good enough for us illiterates."

Literate First Class Ralph N. Prestonby remained standing by the lectern, looking

out over the crowded auditorium, still pleasantly surprised to estimate the day's attendance at something like ninety-seven per cent of enrollment. That was really good; why, it was only three per cent short of perfect! Maybe it was the new rule requiring a sound-recorder excuse for absence. Or it could have been his propaganda campaign about the benefits of education. Or, very easily, it could have been the result of sending Doug Yetksko and some of his boys around to talk to recalcitrant parents. It was good to see that that was having some effect beside an increase in the number of attempts on his life, or the flood of complaints to the Board of Education. Well, Lancedale had gotten Education merged with his Office of Communications, and Lancedale was back of him to the limit, so the complaints had died out on the empty air. And Doug Yetksko was his bodyguard, so most of the would-be assassins had died, also.

The "North American Anthem," which had replaced the "Star-Spangled Banner" after the United States-Canadian-Mexican merger, came to an end. The students and their white-smocked teachers, below, relaxed from attention; most of them sat down, while monitors and teachers in the rear were getting the students into the aisles and marching them off to study halls and classrooms and workshops. The orchestra struck up a lively march tune. He leaned his left elbow—Literates learned early, or did not live to learn, not to immobilize the right hand—on the lectern and watched the interminable business of getting the students marched out, yearning, as he always did at this time, for the privacy of his office, where he could smoke his pipe. Finally, they were all gone, and the orchestra had gathered up its instruments and filed out into the wings of the stage, and he looked up to the left and said, softly:

"All right, Doug; show's over."

With a soft thud, the big man dropped down from the guard's cubicle overhead, grinning cheerfully. He needed a shave—Yetksko always did, in the mornings—and in his leather Literates' uniform, he looked like some ogreish giant out of the mythology of the past.

"I was glad to have you up there with the Big Noise, this morning," Prestonby said. "What a mob! I'm still trying to figure out why we have such an attendance."

"Don't you get it, captain?" Yetksko was reaching up to lock the door of his cubicle; he seemed surprised at Prestonby's obtuseness. "Day before election; the little darlings' moms and pops don't want them out running around. We can look for another big crowd tomorrow, too."

Prestonby gave a snort of disgust. "Of course; how imbecilic can I really get? I didn't notice any of them falling down, so I suppose you didn't see anything out of line."

"Well, the hall monitors make them turn in their little playthings at the doors," Yetksko said, "but hall monitors can be gotten at, and some of the stuff they make in Manual Training, when nobody's watching them—"

Prestonby nodded. Just a week before, a crude but perfectly operative 17-mm shotgun had been discovered in the last stages of manufacture in the machine shop, and five out of six of the worn-out files would vanish, to be ground down into dirks. He often thought of the stories of his grandfather, who had been a major during the Occupation of Russia, after the Fourth World War. Those old-timers didn't know how easy they'd had it; they should have tried to run an Illiterate high school.

Yetksko was still grumbling slanders on the legitimacy of the student body. "One of those little angels shoots me, it's just a cute little prank, and we oughtn't to frown on the little darling when it's just trying to express its dear little personality, or we might give it complexes, or something," he falsettoed incongruously. "And if the little darling's mistake doesn't kill me outright and I shoot back, people talk about King Herod!" He used language about the Board of Education and the tax-paying public that was probably subversive within the meaning of the Loyalty Oath. "I wish I had a pair of 40-mm autocannons up there instead of that sono gun."

"Each class is a little worse than the

one before; in about five years, they'll be making H-bombs in the lab," Prestonby said. In the last week, a dozen pupils had been seriously cut or blackjacked in hall and locker-room fights. "Nice citizens of the future; nice future to look forward to growing old in."

"We won't," Yetksko comforted him. "We can't be lucky all the time; in about a year, they'll find both of us stuffed into a broom closet, when they start looking around to see what's making all the stink."

Prestonby took the thick-barreled gas pistol from the shelf under the lectern and shoved it into his hip pocket; Yetksko picked up a two-and-a-half foot length of rubber hose and tucked it under his left arm. Together, they went back through the wings and out into the hallway that led to the office. So a Twenty-second Century high school was a place where a teacher carried a pistol and a tear-gas projector and a sleep-gas gun, and had a bodyguard, and still walked in danger of his life from armed 'teen-age hooligans. It was meaningless to ask whose fault it was. There had been the World Wars, and the cold-war interbellum periods—rising birth rates, huge demands on the public treasury for armaments, with the public taxed to the saturation point, and no money left for the schools. There had been fantastic "Progressive" education experiments—even in the 'Fifties of the Twentieth Century in the big cities, children were being pushed through grade school without having learned to read. And when there had been money available for education, school boards had insisted on spending it for audio-visual equipment, recordings, films, anything but textbooks. And there had been that lunatic theory that children should be taught to read by recognizing whole words instead of learning the alphabet. And more and more illiterates had been shoved out of the schools, into a world where radio and television and moving pictures were supplanting books and newspapers, and more and more children of illiterates had gone to school without any desire or incentive to learn to read. And finally, the illiterates had become Illiterates, and literacy had become Literacy.

And now, the Associated Fraternities

of Literates had come to monopolize the ability to read and write, and a few men like William R. Lancedale, with a handful of followers like Ralph N. Prestonby, were trying—"

The gleaming cleanliness of the corridor, as always, heartened Prestonby a little; it was a trophy of victory from his first two days at Mineola High School, three years ago. He remembered what they had looked like when he had first seen them.

"This school is a pig pen!" he had barked at the janitorial force. "And even if they are Illiterates, these children aren't pigs; they deserve decent surroundings. This school will be cleaned, immediately, from top to bottom, and it'll be kept that way."

The janitors, all political appointees, Independent-Conservative party-hacks, secure in their jobs, had laughed derisively. The building superintendent, without troubling to rise, had answered him:

"Young man, you don't want to get off on the wrong foot, here," he had said. "This here's the way this school's always been run, an' it's gonna take a lot more than you to change it."

The fellow's name, he recalled, was Kettner; Lancedale had given him a briefing which had included some particulars about him. He was an Independent-Conservative ward-committeeman. He had gotten his present job after being fired from his former position as mailman for listening to other peoples' mail with his pocket recorder-reproducer.

"Yetksko," he had said. "Kick this bum out on his face."

"You can't get away with—" Kettner had begun. Yetksko had yanked him out of his chair with one hand and started for the door with him.

"Just a moment, Yetksko," he had said.

Thinking that he was backing down, they had all begun grinning at him.

"Don't bother opening the door," he had said. "Just kick him out."

After the third kick, Kettner had gotten the door open, himself; the fourth kick sent him across the hall to the opposite wall. He pulled himself to his feet and limped away, never to return. The next

morning, the school was spotless. It had stayed that way.

Beside him, Yetko must also have returned mentally to the past.

"Looks better now than it did when we first saw it, captain," he said.

"Yes. It didn't take us as long to clean up this mess as it did to clean up that mutinous guards company in Pittsburg. But when we cleaned that up, it stayed cleaned. This is like trying to bail out a boat with a pitchfork."

"Yeah. I wish we'dda stayed in Pittsburg, captain. I wish we'd never seen this place!"

"So do I!" Prestonby agreed, heartily.

No, he didn't, either. If he'd never have come to Mineola High School, he'd never have found Claire Pelton.

Sitting down again at the breakfast table with her father, Claire levered another cigarette out of the Readilit and puffed at it with exaggeratedly bored slowness. She was still frightened. Ray shouldn't have done what he did, even if he had furnished a plausible explanation. The trouble with plausible explanations was having to make them. Sooner or later, you made too many, and then you made one that wasn't so plausible, and then all the others were remembered, and they all looked phony. And why had the Senator had to mention Ralph? Was he beginning to suspect the truth about that, too?

I hope not! she thought desperately. If he ever found out about that, it'd kill him. Just kill him, period!

Mrs. Harris must have turned off the video, after they had gone up to the landing stage. To cover her nervousness, she reached up and snapped it on again. The screen lit, and from it a young man with dark eyes under bushy black brows was shouting angrily:

"... Most obvious sort of conspiracy! If the Radical-Socialist Party leaders, or the Consolidated Illiterates' Organization Political Action Committee, need any further evidence of the character of their candidate and idolized leader, Chester Pelton, the treatment given to Pelton's candidacy by Literate First Class Elliot C. Mongery, this morning, ought to be sufficient to remove the scales from the

eyes of the blindest of them. I won't state, in so many words, that Chester Pelton's sold out the Radical-Socialists and the Consolidated Illiterates' Organization to the Associated Fraternities of Literates, because, since no witness to any actual transfer of money can be found, such a statement would be libelous—provided Pelton had nerve enough to sue me."

"Why, you dirty misbegotten illegitimate—!" Pelton was on his feet. His hand went to his hip, and then, realizing that he was unarmed and, in any case, confronted only by an electronic image, he sat down again.

"Pelton's been yapping for socialized Literacy," the man on the screen continued. "I'm not going back to the old argument that any kind of socialization is only the thin edge of the wedge which will pry open the pit of horrors from which the world has climbed since the Fourth World War. If you don't realize that now, it's no use for me to repeat it again. But I will ask you, do you realize for a moment, what a program of socialized Literacy would mean, apart from the implications of any kind of socialization? It would mean that inside of five years, the Literates would control the whole government. They control the courts, now—only a Literate can become a lawyer, and only a lawyer can become a judge. They control the armed forces—only a Literate can enter West Point or Fort MacKenzie or Chapultepec or White Sands or Annapolis. And, if Chester Pelton's socialization scheme goes into effect, there will be no branch of the government which will not be completely under the control of the Associated Fraternities of Literates!"

The screen went suddenly dark. Her father turned, to catch her with her hand still on the switch.

"Put it back on! I want to hear what that lying pimp of a Slade Gardner's saying about me!"

"Phooey; you'd have shot it out, yourself, if you'd had your gun on. I saw you reaching for it. Now be quiet, and take it easy," she ordered.

He reached toward the Readilit for a cigarette, then his hand stopped. His face

was contorted with pain; he gave a gasp of suffocation.

Claire cried in dismay: "You're not going to have another of those attacks? Where are the nitrocaïne bulbs?"

"Don't . . . have any . . . here. Some at the office, but—"

"I told you to get more," she accused.

"Oh, I don't need them, really." His voice was steadier, now; the spasm of pain had passed. He filled his coffee cup and sipped from it. "Turn on the video again, Claire. I want to hear what that Gardner's saying."

"I will not! Don't you have people at party headquarters monitoring this stuff? Well, then. Somebody'll prepare an answer, if he needs answering."

"I think he does. A lot of these dumbos'll hear that and believe it. I'll talk to Frank. He'll know what to do."

Frank again. She frowned.

"Look, Senator; you think Frank Cardon's your friend, but I don't trust him. I never could," she said. "I think he's utterly and entirely unscrupulous. Amoral, I believe, is the word. Like a savage, or a pirate, or one of the old-time Nazis or Communists."

"Oh, Claire!" her father protested. "Frank's in a tough business—you have no idea the lengths competition goes to in the beer business—and he's been in politics, and dealing with racketeers and labor unions, all his life. But he's a good sound Illiterate—family Illiterate for four generations, like ours—and I'd trust him with anything. You heard this fellow Mongery—I always have to pause to keep from calling him Mongrel—saying that I deserved the credit for pulling the Radicals out of the mud and getting the party back on the tracks. Well, I couldn't have begun to do it without Frank Cardon."

Frank Cardon stood on the sidewalk, looking approvingly into the window of O'Reilly's Tavern, in which his display crew had already set up the spread for the current week. On either side was a giant six-foot replica, in black glass, of the Cardon bottle, in the conventional shape accepted by an Illiterate public as containing beer, bearing the red Cardon label with its pictured bottle in a central white disk. Because of the heroic size of

the bottles, the pictured bottle on the label bore a bottle bearing a label bearing a bottle bearing a bottle on a label. . . . He counted eight pictured bottles, down to the tiniest dot of black. There were four-foot bottles next to the six-foot bottles, and three-foot bottles next to them, and, in the middle background, a life-size tridimensional picture of an almost nude and incredibly pulchritudinous young lady smiling in invitation at the passing throng and extending a foaming bottle of Cardon's in her hand. Aside from the printed trademark-registry statements on the labels, there was not a printed word visible in the window.

He pushed through the swinging doors and looked down the long room, with the chairs still roosting sleepily on the tables, and made a quick count of the early drinkers, two thirds of them in white smocks and Sam Browne belts, obviously from Literates' Hall, across the street. Late drinkers, he corrected himself mentally; they'd be the night shift, having their drinks before going home.

"Good morning, Mr. Cardon," the bartender greeted him. "Still drinking your own?"

"Hasn't poisoned me yet," Cardon told him. "Or anybody else." He folded a C-bill accordion-wise and set it on the edge on the bar. "Give everybody what they want."

"Drink up, gentlemen, and have one on Mr. Cardon," the bartender announced, then lowered his voice. "O'Reilly wants to see you. About—" He gave a barely perceptible nod in the direction of the building across the street.

"Yes; I want to see him, too." Cardon poured from the bottle in front of him, accepted the thanks of the house, and, when the bartender brought the fifteen-dollars-odd change from the dozen drinks, he pushed it back.

He drank slowly, looking around the room, then set down his empty glass and went back, past two doors which bore pictured half-doors revealing, respectively, masculine-trousered and feminine-stockinged ankles, and opened the unmarked office door beyond. The bartender, he knew, had pushed the signal button; the door was unlocked, and, inside, O'Reilly



—baptismal name Luigi Orelli—was waiting.

"Chief wants to see you, right away," the saloon keeper said.

The brewer nodded. "All right. Keep me covered; don't know how long I'll be." He crossed the room and opened a corner-cupboard, stepping inside.

The corner cupboard, which was an elevator, took him to a tunnel below the street. Across the street, he entered another elevator, set the indicator for the tenth floor, and ascended. As the car rose, he could feel the personality of Frank Cardon, Illiterate brewer, drop from him, as though he were an actor returning from the stage to his dressing room.

The room into which he emerged was almost that. There was a long table, at which two white-smocked Literates drank coffee and went over some papers; a third Literate sprawled in a deep chair, resting; at a small table, four men in black shirts and leather breeches and field boots played poker, while a fifth, who had just entered and had not yet removed his leather helmet and jacket or his weapons belt, stood watching them.

Cardon went to a row of lockers along the wall, opened one, and took out a white smock, pulling it over his head and zipping it up to the throat. Then he buckled on a Sam Browne with its tablet holster and stylus gas projector. The Literate sprawling in the chair opened one eye.

"Hi, Frank. Feels good to have them on again, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Clean," Cardon replied. "It'll be just for half an hour, but—"

He passed through the door across from the elevator, went down a short hall, and spoke in greeting to the leather-jacketed stormtrooper on guard outside the door at the other end.

"Mr. Cardon," the guard nodded. "Mr. Lancedale's expecting you."

"So I understand, Bert."

He opened the door and went through. William R. Lancedale rose from behind his desk and advanced to greet him with a quick handshake, guiding him to a chair beside the desk. As he did, he sniffed and raised an eyebrow.

"Beer this early, Frank?" he asked.

"Morning, noon, and night, chief," Car-

don replied. "When you said this job was going to be dangerous, I didn't know you meant that it would lead straight to an alcoholic's grave."

"Let me get you a cup of coffee, and a cigar, then." The white-haired Literate executive resumed his seat, passing a hand back and forth slowly across the face of the commo, the diamond on his finger twinkling, and gave brief instructions. "And just relax, for a minute. You have a tough job, this time, Frank."

They were both silent as a novice Literate bustled in with coffee and individually-sealed cigars.

"At least you're not one of these plain-living-and-right-thinking fanatics, like Wilton Joynor and Harvey Graves," Cardon said. "On top of everything else, that I could not take."

Lancedale's thin face broke into a smile, little wrinkles putting his mouth in parentheses. Cardon sampled the coffee, and then used a Sixteenth Century Italian stiletto from Lancedale's desk to perforate the end of his cigar.

"Much as I hate it, I'll have to get out of here as soon as I can," he said. "I don't know how long O'Reilly can keep me covered, down at the tavern—"

Lancedale nodded. "Well, how are things going, then?"

"First of all, the brewery," Cardon began.

Lancedale consigned the brewery to perdition. "That's just your cover; any money it makes is purely irrelevant. How about the election?"

"Pelton's in," Cardon said. "As nearly in as any candidate ever was before the polls opened. Three months ago, the Independents were as solid as Gibraltar used to be. Today, they look like Gibraltar after that H-bomb hit it. The only difference is, they don't know what hit them, yet."

"Hamilton's campaign manager does," Lancedale said. "Did you hear his telecast, this morning?"

Cardon shook his head. Lancedale handed over a little half-inch, thirty-minute, record disk.

"All you need is the first three or four minutes," he said. "The rest of it is repetition."





Cardon put the disk in his pocket recorder and set it for play-back, putting the plug in his ear. After a while, he shut it off and took out the ear plug.

"That's bad! What are we going to do about it?"

Lancedale shrugged. "What are you going to do?" he countered. "You're Pelton's campaign manager—Heaven pity him."

Cardon thought for a moment. "We'll play it for laughs," he decided. "Some of our semantics experts could make the joke of the year out of it by the time the polls open tomorrow. The Fraternities bribing their worst enemy to attack them, so that he can ruin their business; who's been listening to a tape of 'Alice in Wonderland' at Independent-Conservative headquarters?"

"That would work," Lancedale agreed. "And we can count on our friends Joyner and Graves to give you every possible assistance with their customary bull-in-a-china-shop tactics. I suppose you've seen these posters they've been plastering around: *If you can read this, Chester Pelton is your sworn enemy! A vote for Pelton is a vote for your own enslavement!*"

"Naturally. And have you seen the tele-

cast we've been using—a view of it, with a semantically correct spoken paraphrase?"

Lancedale nodded. "And I've also noticed that those posters have been acquiring different obscene crayon-drawings, too. That's just typical of the short-range Joyner-Graves mentality. Why, they've made more votes for Pelton than he's made for himself. Is it any wonder we're convinced that people like that aren't to be trusted to formulate the future policy of the Fraternities?"

"Well . . . they've proved themselves wrong. I wonder, though, if we can prove ourselves right, in the long run. There are times when this thing scares me, chief. If anything went wrong—"

"What, for instance?"

"Somebody could get to Pelton," Cardon made a stabbing gesture with the stiletto, which he still held. "Maybe you don't really know how hot this thing's gotten. What we had to cut out of Mongery's report, this morning—"

"Oh, I've been keeping in touch," Lancedale understated gently.

"Well then. If anything happened to Pelton, there wouldn't be a Literate left alive in this city twelve hours later. And I question whether or not Graves and Joyner know that."

"I think they do. If they don't, it's

not because I've failed to point it out to them. Of course, there are the Independent-Conservative grafters; a lot of them are beginning to hear jail doors opening for them, and they're scared. But I think routine bodyguarding ought to protect Pelton from them, or from any isolated fanatics."

"And there is also the matter of Pelton's daughter, and his son," Cardon said. "We know, and Graves and Joyner know, and I assume that Slade Gardner knows, that they can both read and write as well as any Literate in the Fraternities. Suppose that got out between now and the election?"

"And that could not only hurt Pelton, but it would expose the work we've been doing in the schools," Lancedale added. "And even inside the Fraternities, that would raise the devil. Joyner and Graves don't begin to realize how far we've gone with that. They could kick up a simply hideous row about it!"

"And if Pelton found out that his kids are Literates—*Woool!*" Cardon grimaced. "Or what we've been doing to him. I hope I'm not around when that happens. I'm beginning to like the cantankerous old bugger."

"I was afraid of that," Lancedale said. "Well, don't let it interfere with what you have to do. Remember, Frank, the Plan has to come first, always."

He walked with O'Reilly to the street door, talking about tomorrow's election; after shaking hands with the saloonkeeper, he crossed the sidewalk and stepped onto the beltway, moving across the strips until he came to the twenty m.p.h. strip. The tall office buildings of upper Yonkers Borough marched away as he stood on the strip, appreciatively puffing at Lancedale's cigar. The character of the street changed; the buildings grew lower, and the quiet and fashionable ground-floor shops and cafés gave place to bargain stores, their audio-advertisers whooping urgently about improbable prices and offerings, and garish, noisy, crowded bars and cafeterias blaring recorded popular music. There was quite a bit of political advertising in evidence—huge pictures of the two major senatorial candidates. He estimated that Chester Pelton's bald head and bulldog

features appeared twice for every one of Grant Hamilton's white locks, old-fashioned spectacles and self-satisfied smirk.

Then he came to the building on which he had parked his 'copter, and left the beltway, entering and riding up to the landing stage on the helical escalator. There seemed to have been some trouble; about a dozen Independent-Conservative stormtroopers, in their white robes and hoods, with the fiery-cross emblem on their breasts, were bunched together, most of them with their right hands inside their bosoms, while a similar group of Radical-Conservative stormtroopers, with their black sombreros and little black masks, stood watching them and fingering the white-handled pistols they wore in pairs on their belts. Between the two groups were four city policemen, looking acutely unhappy.

The group in the Lone Ranger uniforms, he saw, were standing in front of a huge tri-dimensional animated portrait of Chester Pelton. As he watched, the pictured candidate raised a clenched fist, and Pelton's recorded and amplified voice thundered:

*"Put the Literates in their place! Our servants, not our masters!"*

He recognized the group leader of the Radical-Socialists—the masks were too small to be more than token disguises—and beckoned to him, at the same time walking toward his 'copter. The man in black with the white-handled pistols followed him, spurs jingling.

"Hello, Mr. Cardon," he said, joining him. "Nothing to it. We got a tip they were coming to sabotage Big Brother, over there. Take out our sound recording, and put in one of their own, like they did over in Queens, last week. The town clowns got here in time to save everybody's face, so there wasn't any shooting. We're staying put till they go, though."

*"Put the Literates in their place! Our servants, not our masters!"* the huge tridianimate bellowed.

Over in Queens, the Independents had managed to get at a similar tridianimate, had taken out the record, and put in one: *I am a lying fraud! Vote for Grant Hamilton and liberty and sound government!*

"Smart work, Goodkin," he approved. "Don't let any of your boys start the gunplay. The city cops are beginning to get wise to who's going to win the election, tomorrow, but don't antagonize them. But if any of those Ku Kluxers tries to pull a gun, don't waste time trying to wing him. Just hold on to that fiery something-or-other on his chest and let him have it, and let the coroner worry about him."

"Yeah. With pleasure," Goodkin replied. "You know, that nightshirt thing they wear is about the stupidest idea for a stormtroop uniform I ever saw. Natural target in a gunfight, and in a rough-and-tumble it gets them all tangled up. Ah, there go a couple of coppers to talk to them; that's what they've been waiting on. Now they can beat it without looking like they been run out by our gang."

Cardon nodded. "Tell your boys to stay around for a while; they may expect you to leave right after they do, and then they'll try to slip back. You did a good job; got here promptly. Be seeing you, Goodkin."

He climbed into his own 'copter and started the motor.

*"Put the Literates in their place! the tri-dimensional colossus roared triumphantly after the retreating Independents. "Our servants, not our masters!"*

At eight thousand, he got the 'copter onto the lower Manhattan beam and relaxed. First of all, he'd have to do something about answering Slade Gardner's telecast propaganda. That stuff was dangerous. The answer ought to go on the air by noon, and should be stepped up through the afternoon. First as a straight news story; Elliot Mongery had fifteen minutes, beginning at 1215—no, that wouldn't do. Mongery's sponsor for that time was Atomflame Heaters, and Atomflame was a subsidiary of Canada Northwest Fissionables, and Canada Northwest was umbilicus-deep in that Kettle River lease graft that Pelton had sworn to get investigated as soon as he took office. Professional ethics wouldn't allow Mongery to say anything in Pelton's behalf on Atomflame's time. Well, there was Guthrie Parham, he came on at 1245,

and his sponsor was all right. He'd call Parham and tell him what he wanted done.

The buzzer warned him that he was approaching the lower Manhattan beacon; he shifted to manual control, dropped down to the three-thousand-foot level, and set his selector beam for the signal from Pelton's Purchasers' Paradise. Down toward the tip of the island, in the section that had been rebuilt after that Stalin Mark XV guided missile had gotten through the counter-rocket defenses in 1987, he could see the quadrate cross of his goal, with public landing stages on each of the four arms, and the higher central block with its landing stage for freight and store personnel. Above the four public stages, helicopters swarmed like May flies—May flies which had mutated and invented ritual or military drill or choreography—coming in in four streams to the tips of the arms and rising vertically from the middle. There was about ten times the normal amount of traffic for this early in the morning. He wondered, briefly, then remembered and cursed. That infernal sale!

Grudgingly, he respected Russell Latterman's smartness, and in consequence, the ability of Wilton Joyner and Harvey Graves in selecting a good agent to plant in Pelton's store. Latterman gave a plausible impersonation of the Illiterate businessman, loyal Prime Minister of Pelton's commercial empire, Generalissimo in the perpetual war against Macy & Gimbel's. From that viewpoint, the sale was excellent business—Latterman had gotten the jump on all the other department stores for the winter fashions and fall sports trade. He had also turned the store into a madhouse at the exact time when Chester Pelton needed to give all his attention to the election.

Pressing the button that put on his private recognition signal, he rose above the incoming customers and began to drop toward the private landing stage, circling to get a view of the other four stages. Maybe the sale could be turned to some advantage, at that. A free souvenir with each purchase, carrying a Pelton-for-Senator picture-message—

He broke off, peering down at the five-hundred-foot-square landing stage above

the central block, then brought his 'copter swooping down rapidly. The white-clad figures he had seen swarming up the helical escalator were not wearing the Ku Klux robes of the Independent-Conservative stormtroops, as he had first feared—they were in Literate smocks, and among them were the black leather jackets and futuristic helmets of their guards. They were led, he saw, by Stephen S. Bayne, the store's Chief Literate; with him were his assistant, Literate Third Class Roger B. Feinberg, and the novices carrying books and briefcases and cased typewriters, and the guards, and every Literate employed in the store. Four or five men in ordinarily vivid-colored business suits were obviously expostulating about something. As he landed and threw back the transparent canopy, he could hear a babel of voices, above which Feinberg was crying: "Unfair! Unfair! Unfair to Organized Literacy!"

He jumped out and hurried over.

"But you simply can't!" a white-haired man in blue-and-orange business clothes was protesting. "If you do, the Associated Fraternities'll be liable for losses we incur; you know that!"

Bayne, his thin face livid with anger—and also, Cardon noticed, with what looked like a couple of fresh bruises—ignored him. Feinberg broke off his chant of "Unfair! Unfair!" long enough to answer:

"A Literate First Class has been brutally assaulted by the Illiterate owner of this store. Literate service for this store is, accordingly, being discontinued, pending a decision by the Grand Council of the local Fraternity."

Cardon grabbed the blue-and-orange clad man and dragged him to one side.

"What happened, Hutschnecker?" he demanded.

"They're walking out on us," Hutschnecker told him, unnecessarily. "The boss had a fight with Bayne; knocked him down a couple of times. Bayne tried to pull his tablet gun, and I grabbed it away from him, and somebody else grabbed Pelton before he could pull his, and a couple of store cops got all the other Literates in the office covered. Then

Bayne put on the general-address system and began calling out the Literates—"

"Yes, but why did Pelton beat Bayne up?"

"Bayne made a pass at Miss Claire. I wasn't there when it happened; she came into the office—"

Cardon felt his face tighten into a frown of perplexity. That wasn't like Literate First Class Stephen S. Bayne. He made quite a hobby of pinching salesgirls behind the counter which was one thing; the boss' daughter was quite another.

"Where's Latterman?" he asked, looking around.

"Down in the office, with the others, trying to help Mr. Pelton. He's had another of those heart attacks—"

Cardon swore and ran for the descending escalator, running down the rotating spiral to the executive floor and jumping off into the gawking mob of Illiterate clerks crowded in the open doors of Pelton's office. He hit and shoved and elbowed and cursed them out of the way, and burst into the big room beyond, and then, for a moment, he was almost sorry he had come.

Pelton was slumped in his big relaxer chair, his face pale and twisted in pain, his breath coming in feeble gasps. His daughter was beside him, her blonde head bent over him; Russell Latterman was standing to one side, watching intently. For an instant, Cardon was reminded of a tomcat watching a promising mouse hole.

"Claire!" Cardon exploded, "give him a nitrocaïne bulb. Why are you all just standing around?"

Claire turned. "There are none," she said, looking at him with desperate eyes. "The box is empty; he must have used them all."

He shot a quick glance at Latterman, catching the sales manager before he could erase a look of triumph from his face. Things began to add up. Latterman, of course, was the undercover man for Wilton Joyner and Harvey Graves and the rest of the Conservative faction at Literates' Hall, just as he, himself, was Lancedale's agent. Obsessed with immediate advantages and disadvantages,

the Joyner-Graves faction wanted to secure the re-election of Grant Hamilton, and the way things had been going in the past two months, only Chester Pelton's death could accomplish that. Latterman had probably thrown out Pelton's nitro-caine capsules and then put Bayne up to insulting Pelton's daughter, knowing that a fit of rage would bring on another heart attack, which could be fatal without the medicine.

"Well, send for more!"

"The prescription's in the safe," she said faintly.

The office safe was locked, and only a Literate could open it. The double combination was neatly stenciled on the door, the numbers spelled out as words and the letters spelled in phonetic equivalents. All three of them—himself, Claire, and Russel Latterman—could read them. None of them dared admit it. Latterman was fairly licking his chops in anticipation. If Cardon opened the safe, Pelton's campaign manager stood convicted as a Literate. If Claire opened it, the gaggle of Illiterate clerks in the doorway would see, and speedily spread the news, that the daughter of the arch-foe of Literacy was herself able to read. Maybe Latterman hadn't really intended his employer to die. Maybe this was the situation he had really intended to contrive.

Chester Pelton couldn't be allowed to die. If Grant Hamilton were returned to the Senate, the long-range planning of William Lancedale would suffer a crushing setback, and the public reaction would be catastrophic. *The plan comes first*, Lancedale had told him. He made his decision, and then saw that he hadn't needed to make it. Claire had straightened, left her father, crossed quickly to the safe, and was kneeling in front of it, her back stiff with determination, her fingers busy at the dials, here eyes going from them to the printed combination and back again. She swung open the door, skimmed through the papers inside, unerringly selected the prescription, and rose.

"Here, Russ; go get it filled at once," she ordered. "And hurry!"

Oh, no, you don't, Cardon thought. One chance is enough for you, Russ.

He snatched the prescription from her and turned to Latterman.

"I'll get it," he told the sales manager. "You're needed for the sale; stay on the job here."

"But with the Literates walked out, we can't—"

Cardon blazed: "Do I have to teach you your business? Have a sample of each item set aside at the counter, and pile sales slips under it. And for unique items, just detach the tag and put it with the sales slip. Now get out of here, and get cracking with it!" He picked up the pistol that had been taken from Pelton when he had tried to draw it on Bayne, checking the chamber and setting the safety. "Know how to use this?" he asked Claire. "Then hang onto it, and stay close to your father. This wasn't any accident, it was a deliberate attempt on his life. I'll have a couple of store cops sent in here; see that they stay with you."

He gave her no chance to argue, Pushing Latterman ahead of him, he drove through the mob of clerks outside the door.

"... Course she can; didn't you see her open the safe?" he heard. "... Nobody but a Literate—" "Then she's a Literate, herself!"

A couple of centuries ago, they would have talked like that if it had been discovered that the girl were pregnant; a couple of centuries before that, they would have been equally horrified if she had been discovered to have been a Protestant, or a Catholic, or whatever the locally unpopular religion happened to be. By noon, this would be all over Penn-Jersey-York; coming on top of Slade Gardner's accusations—

He ran up the spiral escalator, stumbling and regaining his footing as he left it. Bayne and his striking Literates were all gone; he saw a sergeant of Pelton's store police and went toward him, taking his spare identity-badge from his pocket.

"Here," he said, handing it to the sergeant. "Get another officer, and go down to Pelton's office. Show it to Miss Pelton, and tell her I sent you. There's been an attempt on Chester Pelton's life; you're to stay with him. Use your own judgment, but don't let anybody, and that



definitely includes Russell Latterman, get at him. If you see anything suspicious, shoot first and ask questions afterwards. What's your name, sergeant?"

"Coccozello, sir. Guido Coccozello."

"All right. There'll be a medic or a pharmacist—a Literate, anyhow—with medicine for Mr. Pelton. He'll ask for you, by name, and mention me. And there'll be another Literate, maybe; he'll know your name, and use mine. Hurry, now, sergeant."

He jumped into his 'copter, pulled forward the plexiglass canopy, and took off vertically to ten thousand feet, then, orienting himself, swooped downward toward a landing stage on the other side of the East River, cutting across traffic levels with an utter contempt for regulations.

The building on which he landed was one of the principal pharmacies; he spiraled down on the escalator to the main floor and went directly to the Literate in charge, noticing that he wore on his Sam Browne not only the badges of retail-merchandising, pharmacist and graduate chemist but also that of medic-in-training. Snatching a pad and pencil from a counter, he wrote hastily: *Your private office, at once; urgent and important.*

Looking at it, the Literate nodded in recognition of Cardon's Literacy.

"Over this way, sir," he said, guiding Cardon to his small cubicle office.

"Here," Cardon gave him the prescription. "Nitrocaïne bulbs. They're for Chester Pelton; he's had a serious heart attack. He needs these with all speed. I don't suppose I need tell you how many kinds of hell will break loose if he dies now and the Fraternities are accused, as the Illiterates' Organization will be sure to, of having had him poisoned."

"Who are you?" the Literate asked, taking the prescription and glancing at it. "That,"—he gestured toward Cardon's silver-laced black Mexican jacket—"isn't exactly a white smock."

Cardon had his pocket recorder in his hand. He held it out, pressing a concealed stud; the stylus-and-tablet insigna glowed redly on it for a moment, then vanished. The uniformed Literate nodded.

"Fill this exactly; better do it yourself, to make sure, and take it over to Pelton's yourself. I see you have a medic-trainee's badge. Ask for Sergeant Coccozello, and tell him Frank Cardon sent you." The Literate, who had not recognized him before, opened his eyes at the name and whistled softly. "And fix up a sedative to keep him quiet for not less than four nor more than six hours. Let me use your visiphone for a while, if you please."

The man in the Literate smock nodded and hurried out. Cardon dialed William R. Lancedale's private number. When Lancedale's thin, intense face appeared on the screen, he reported swiftly.

"The way I estimate it," he finished, "Latterman put Bayne up to making a pass at the girl, after having thrown out Pelton's nitrocaïne bulbs. Probably told the silly jerk that Claire was pining away with secret passion for him, or something. Maybe he wanted to kill Pelton; maybe he just wanted this to happen."

"I assume there's no chance of stopping a leak?"

Cardon laughed with mirthless harshness. "That, I take it, was rhetorical."

"Yes, of course." Lancedale's face assumed the blank expression that went with a pause for semantic reintegration. "Can you cover yourself for about an hour?"

"Certainly. 'Copter trouble. Visits to campaign headquarters. An appeal on Pelton's behalf for a new crew of Literates for the store—"

"Good enough. Come over. I think I can see a way to turn this to advantage. I'm going to call for an emergency session of the Grand Council this afternoon, and I'll want you sitting in on it; I want to talk to you about plans now." He considered for a moment. "There's too much of a crowd at O'Reilly's now; come the church way."

Breaking the connection, Cardon dialed again. A girl's face, over a Literate Third Class smock, appeared in the screen; a lovely golden voice chimed at him:

"Mineola High School; good morning, sir."

"Good morning. Frank Cardon here. Let me talk, at once, to your principal, Literate First Class Prestonby."



Ralph Prestonby cleared his throat, slipped a master disk into the recording machine beside his desk, and pressed the start button.

"Dear Parent or Guardian," he began. "Your daughter, now a third-year student at this school, has reached the age of eligibility for the Domestic Science course entitled, 'How To Win and Hold a Husband.' Statistics show that girls who have completed this valuable course are sooner, longer, and happier married than those who have not enjoyed its advantages. We recommend it most highly.

"However, because of the delicate nature of some of the visual material used, your consent is required. You can attach such consent to this disk by running it for at least ten seconds after the sign-off and then switching from 'Play' to 'Transcribe.' Kindly include your full name, as well as your daughter's, and place your thumbprint on the opposite side of the disk. Very sincerely yours, Literate First Class Ralph C. Prestonby, Principal."

He put the master disk in an envelope, checked over a list of names and addresses of parents and girl students, and put that in also. He looked over the winter sports schedule, and signed and thumbprinted it. Then he loaded the recorder with his morning's mail, switched to "Play," and started it. As he listened, he blew smoke rings across the room and toyed with a dagger, made from a file, which had been thrown down the central light-well at him a few days before. The invention of the pocket recorder, which put a half-hour's conversation on a half-inch disk, had done more to slow down business and promote inane correspondence than anything since the earlier inventions of shorthand, typewriters and pretty stenographers. Finally, he cleared the machine, dumping the whole mess into a basket and carrying it out to his secretary.

"Miss Collins, take this infernal rubbish and have a couple of the girls divide it between them, play it off, and make a digest of it," he said. "And here. The sports schedule, and this parental-consent thing on the husband-trapping course. Have them taken care of."

"This stuff," Martha Collins said, poking at the pile of letter disks. "I suppose about half of it is threats, abuse and obscenities, and the other half is from long-winded bores with idiotic suggestions and ill-natured gripes. I'll use that old tag line, again—'hoping you appreciate our brevity as much as we enjoyed yours—'"

"Yes. That'll be all right." He looked at his watch. "I'm going to make a personal building-tour, instead of using the TV. The animals are sort of restless, today. The election; the infantile compulsion to take sides. If you need me for anything urgent, don't use oral call. Just flash my signal, red-blue-red-blue, on the hall and classroom screens. Oh, Doug!"

Yetsko, his length of rubber hose under his arm, ambled out of Prestonby's private office, stopping to stub out his cigarette. The action reminded Prestonby that he still had his pipe in his mouth; he knocked it out and pocketed it. Together, they went into the hall outside.

"Where to, first, captain?" Yetisko wanted to know.

"Cloak-and-Dagger Department, on the top floor. Then we'll drop down to the shops, and then up through Domestic Science and Business and General Arts."

"And back here. We hope," Yetisko finished.

They took a service elevator to the top floor, emerging into a stockroom piled with boxes and crates and cases of sound records and cans of film and stacks of picture cards, and all the other impedimenta of Illiterate education. Passing through it to the other end, Prestonby unlocked a door, and they went down a short hall, to where ten or fifteen boys and girls had just gotten off a helical escalator and were queued up at a door at the other end. There were two Literate guards in black leather, and a student-monitor, with his white belt and rubber truncheon, outside the door.

Prestonby swore under his breath. He'd hoped they'd miss this, but since they hadn't, there was nothing for it but to fall in at the tail of the queue. One by one, the boys and girls went up, spoke briefly to the guards and the student-monitor, and were passed through the

door. Each time, one of the guards had to open it with a key. Finally, it was Prestonby's turn.

"B, D, F, H, J, L, N, P, R, T, V, X, Y," he recited to the guardians of the door.

"A, C, E, G, I, K, M, O, Q, S, U, W, Y," the monitor replied solemnly. "The inkwell is dry, and the book is dusty."

"But tomorrow, there will be writing and reading for all," Prestonby answered.

The guard with the key unlocked the door, and he and Yetsko went through, into an utterly silent sound-proofed room, and from it into an inner, noisy room, where a recorded voice was chanting:

"Hat—*huh-ah-tuh*. H-a-t. Box—*buh-oh-kss*. B-o-x. Gun—*guh-uh-nnn*. G-u-n. *Girl—guh-ih-rrr-lll*," while pictures were flashed on a screen at the front, and words appeared under them.

There were about twenty boys and girls, of the freshman-year age-bracket, at desk-seats, facing the screen. They'd started learning the alphabet when school had opened in September; now they had gotten as far as combining letters into simple words. In another month, they'd be as far as diphthongs and would be initiated into the mysteries of silent letters. Maybe sooner than that; he was finding that children who had not been taught to read until their twelfth year learned much more rapidly than the primary grade children in the Literate schools.

What he was doing here wasn't exactly illegal. It wasn't even against the strict letter of Fraternity regulations. But it had to be done clandestinely. What he'd have liked to have done would have been to have given every boy and girl in English I the same instruction this selected group was getting, but that would have been out of the question. The public would never have stood for it; the police would have had to intervene to prevent a riotous mob of Illiterates from tearing the school down brick by brick, and even if that didn't happen, the ensuing uproar inside the Fraternity would have blown the roof off Literates' Hall. Even Lancedale couldn't have survived such an explosion, and the body of Literate First Class Ralph N. Prestonby would

have been found in a vacant lot the next morning. Even many of Lancedale's supporters would have turned on him in anger at this sudden blow to the Fraternities' monopoly of the printed word.

So it had to be kept secret, and since adolescents in possession of a secret are under constant temptation to hint mysteriously in the presence of outsiders, this hocus-pocus of ritual and password and countersign had to be resorted to. He'd been in conspiratorial work of other kinds, and knew that there was a sound psychological basis for most of what seemed, at first glance, to be mere melodramatic claptrap.

He and Yetsko passed on through a door across the room, into another sound-proofed room. The work of soundproofing and partitioning the old stockroom had been done in the last semester of his first year at Mineola High, by members of the graduating class of building-trades students, who had then gone their several ways convinced that they had been working on a set of music-class practice rooms. The Board of Education had never even found out about it. In this second room, a Literate teacher, one of the Lancedale faction, had a reading class of twenty-five or thirty. A girl was on her feet, with a book in her hand, reading from it:

"We are not sure of sorrow;

And joy was never sure;

Today will die tomorrow;

Time stoops to no man's lure;

And love, grown faint and fretful

With lips but half regretful

Sighs, and with eyes forgetful

Weeps that no loves endure."

Then she handed the book—it was the only copy—to the boy sitting in front of her, and he rose to read the next verse. Prestonby, catching the teacher's eye, nodded and smiled. This was a third-year class, of course, but from h-a-t spells hat to Swinburne in three years was good work.

There were three other classes, a total of little over a hundred students. There was no trouble; they were there for one purpose only—to learn. He spoke with one of the teachers, whose class was busy with a written exercise; he talked for a

while to another whose only duty at the moment was to answer questions and furnish help to a small class who were reading silently from a variety of smuggled-in volumes.

"Only a hundred and twenty, out of five thousand," Yetsko said to him, as they were dropping down in the elevator by which they had come. "Think you'll ever really get anything done with them?"

"I won't. Maybe they won't," he replied. "But the ones they'll teach will. They're just a cadre; it'll take fifty years before the effects are really felt. But some day—"

The shops—a good half of the school was trades-training—were noisy and busy. Here Prestonby kept his hand on his gas-projector, and Yetsko had his rubber hose ready, either to strike or discard in favor of his pistol. The instructors were similarly on the alert and ready for trouble—he had seen penitentiaries where the guards took it easier. Carpentry and building trades. Machine shop. Welding. 'Copter and TV repair shops—he made a minor and relatively honest graft there, from the sale of rebuilt equipment. Even an atomic-equipment shop, though there was nothing in the place that would excite a Geiger more than the instructor's luminous-dial watch.

Domestic Science—Home Decorating, Home Handicrafts, Use of Home Appliances, Beautician School, Charm School. He and Yetsko sampled the products of the Cooking School, intended for the cafeteria, and found them edible if uninspired.

Business—classes in recording letters, using Illiterate cards for same, filing recordings—always with the counsel, "When in doubt, consult a Literate."

General Arts—Spanish and French, from elaborate record players, the progeny of the old Twentieth Century Linguaphone. English, with recorded-speech composition, enunciation training, semantics, and what Prestonby called English Illiterature. The class he visited was drowsing through one of the less colorful sections of "Gone With The Wind." World History, with half the students frankly asleep through an audio-visual on the Feudal System, with planted

hints on how nice a revival of same would be, and identifying the clergy of the Middle Ages with the Fraternities of Literates. American History, with the class wide awake, since Custer's Massacre was obviously only moments away.

"Wantta bet one of those little cherubs doesn't try to scalp another before the day's out?" Yetsko whispered.

Prestonby shook his head. "No bet. Remember that film on the Spanish Inquisition, that we had to discontinue?"

It was then that the light on the classroom screen, which had been flickering green and white, suddenly began flashing Prestonby's wanted-at-office signal.

Prestonby found Frank Cardon looking out of the screen in his private office. The round, ordinarily cheerful, face was serious, but the innocent blue eyes were as unreadable as ever. He was wearing one of the new Mexican *charro*-style jackets, black laced with silver.

"I can't see all your office, Ralph,"

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he said as Prestonby approached. "Are you alone?"

"Doug Yetsko's all," Prestonby said, and, as Cardon hesitated, added: "Don't be silly, Frank; he's my bodyguard. What could I be in that he wouldn't know all about?"

Cardon nodded. "Well, we're in a jam up to here." A handwave conveyed the impression that the sea of troubles had risen to his chin. He spoke at some length, describing the fight between Chester Pelton and Stephen S. Bayne, the Literate strike at Pelton's Purchasers' Paradise, Pelton's heart attack, and the circumstances of Claire's opening the safe. "So you see," he finished. "Maybe Latterman tried to kill Pelton, maybe he just tried to do what he did. I can't take chances either way."

Prestonby thought furiously. "You say Claire's alone at the store with her father?"

"And a couple of store cops, sterling characters with the hearts of lions and the brains of goldfish," Cardon replied. "And Russ Latterman, and maybe four or five Conservative goons he's managed to infiltrate into the store."

Prestonby was still thinking, aloud, now. "Maybe they did mean to kill Pelton; in that case, they'll try again. Or maybe they only wanted to expose Claire's literacy. It's hard to say what else they'd try—maybe kidnap her, to truth-drug her and use her as a guest-artist on a Conservative telecast. I'm going over to the store, now."

"That's a good idea, Ralph. If you hadn't thought of it, I was going to suggest it. Land on the central stage, ask for Sergeant Coccozello of the store police, and give my name. Even aside from everything else, it'd be a good idea to have somebody there who can read and dares admit it, till a new crew of Literates can get there. You were speaking about the possibility of kidnapping; how about the boy? Ray?"

Prestonby nodded. "I'll have him come here to my office, and stay there till I get back; I'll have Yetsko stay with him." He turned to where the big man in black leather stood guard at the door. "Doug, go get Ray Pelton and bring him here.

Check with Miss Collins for where he'd be, now." He turned back to the screen. "Anything else, Frank?"

"Isn't that enough?" the brewer-Literate demanded. "I'll call you at the store, after a while. 'Bye.'"

The screen darkened as Cardon broke the connection. Prestonby got to his feet, went to his desk, and picked up a pipe, digging out the ashes from the bowl with an ice pick that one of the teachers had taken from a sixteen-year-old would-be murderer. He checked his tablet gun, made sure there was an extra loaded clip in the holster, and got two more spare clips from the arms locker. Then, to make sure, he called Pelton's store, talking for a while to the police sergeant Cardon had mentioned. By the time he was finished, the door opened and Yetsko ushered Ray Pelton in.

"What's happened?" the boy asked. "Doug told me that the Senator . . . my father . . . had another heart attack."

"Yes, Ray. I don't believe he's in any great danger. He's at the store, resting in his office." He went on to tell the boy what had happened, exactly in full detail. He was only fifteen, but already he had completed the four-reading course and he could think a great deal more logically than seventy per cent of the people who were legally entitled to vote. Ray listened seriously, and proved Prestonby's confidence justified by nodding.

"Frame-up," he said succinctly. "Stinks like a glue factory of a put-up job. Something's going to happen to Russ Latterman, one of these days."

"I think you'd better let Frank Cardon take care of him, Ray," Prestonby advised. "I think there are more angles to this than he told me. Now, I'm going over to the store. Somebody's got to stay with Claire. I want you to stay here, in this room. If anybody sends you any message supposed to be from me, just ignore it. It'll be a trap. If I want to get in touch with you, I'll call you, with vision-image."

"Mean somebody might try to kidnap me, or Claire, to force the Senator to withdraw, or something?" Ray asked, his eyes widening.

"You catch on quickly, Ray," Preston-

by commended him. "Doug, you stay with Ray till I get back. Don't let him out of your sight for an instant. At noon, have Miss Collins get lunches for both of you sent up; if I'm not back by fifteen-hundred, take him to his home, and stay with him there."

For half an hour, Frank Cardon made a flying tour of Radical-Socialist borough headquarters. Even at the Manhattan headquarters, which he visited immediately after his talk with Prestonby, the news had already gotten out. The atmosphere of optimistic triumph which had undoubtedly followed Mongery's telecast and his report on the Trotter Poll, had evaporated. The Literate clerical help was gathered in a tight knot, obviously enjoying the reaction. In smaller and constantly changing groups, the volunteers, the paid helpers, the dirt-squirters, the goon gangs, gathered, talking in worried or frightened or angry voices. When Cardon entered and was recognized, there was a concerted movement toward him. His two regular bodyguards, both on leave from the Literate stormtroops, moved quickly to range themselves on either side of him. With a gesture, he halted the others.

"Hold it!" he called. "I know what you're worried about. I was there when it happened, and saw everything."

He paused, to let them assimilate that, and continued: "Now get this, all of you! Our boss, and—if *he lives*—our next senator, was the victim of a deliberate murder attempt, by Literate First Class Bayne, who threw out his supply of nitrocaïne bulbs and then goaded him into a heart attack which, except for his daughter, would have been fatal. Claire Pelton deserves the deepest gratitude of every Radical-Socialist in the state. She's a smart girl, and she saved the life of her father and our leader.

"But—she is *not* a Literate!" he cried loudly. "All she did was something any of you could have done—something I've done, myself, so that I won't be locked out of my own safe and have to wait for a Literate to come and open it for me. She simply kept her eye on the Literates who were opening the safe, and learned the combination from the positions to which they turned the dial. And you

believe, on the strength of that, that she's a Literate? The next thing, you'll be believing that professional liar of a Slade Gardner. And you call yourselves politicians!" He fairly gargled obscenities.

Looking around, he caught sight of a pair who seemed something less than impressed with his account of it. Joe West, thick-armed, hairy-chested, blue-jowled; Horace Yingling, thin and gangling. They weren't Radical-Socialist party people; they were from the Political Action Committee of the Consolidated Illiterates Organization, and their slogan was simpler and more to the point than Chester Pelton's—the only good literate is a dead Literate. He tensed himself and challenged them directly.

"Joe; Horace. How about you? Satisfied the Pelton girl isn't a Literate, now?"

Yingling looked at West, and West looked back at him questioningly. Evidently the *suavitor in modo* was Yingling's province, and the *fortior in re* was West's.

"Yeh, sure, Mr. Cardon," Yingling said dubiously. "Now that you explain it, we see how it was."

It was worse than that in some of the other boroughs. One fanatic, imagining that Cardon himself was a crypto-Literate, drew a gun. Cardon's guards disarmed him and beat him senseless. At another headquarters, some character was circulating about declaring that not only Claire Pelton but her younger brother, Ray, as well, were Literates. Cardon's two men hustled him out of the building, and, after about twenty minutes, returned alone. Cardon hoped that the body would not be found until after the polls closed, the next day.

Finally, leaving his guards with the 'copter at a public landing stage, he made his way, by devious routes, to William R. Lancedale's office, and found Lancedale at his desk, seeming not to have moved since he had showed his agent out earlier in the day.

"Well, we're in a nice puddle of something-or-other," Cardon greeted him. "On top of that Gardner telecast, this morning—"

"Guthrie Parham's taking care of that, and everything's going to be done to



ridicule Gardner," Lancedale told him. "And even this business at the store can be turned to some advantage. Before we're through, we may gain more votes than we lose for Pelton. And we had an informal meeting—Joyner for Retail Merchandising, Starke for Grievance Settlements, and four or five others including myself, to make up a quorum. We had Bayne in, and heard his story of it, and we got a report from one of our stoolies in the store. Bayne thought he was due for a commendation; instead, he got an eat-out. Of course, it was a fact that Pelton'd hit him, and we can't have Literates punched around, regardless of provocation. So we voted to fine Pelton ten million for beating Bayne up, and to award him ten million for losses resulting from unauthorized withdrawal of Literate services. We ordered a new crew of Literates to the store, and we exiled Bayne to Brooklyn, to something called Stillman's Used Copter and Junk Bazaar. For the next few months, the only thing he'll find that's round and pinchable will be secondhand tires. But don't be too hard on him; I think he did us a favor."

"You mean, starting a rift between Pelton and the Consolidated Illiterates' Organization, which can widen after the election?"

"No. I hadn't thought of it that way, Frank," Lancedale smiled. "It's an idea worth keeping in mind, and we'll exploit it, later. What I was thinking about was the more immediate problem of the election—"

The buzzer on Lancedale's desk interrupted, and a voice came out of the commo box:

"Message, urgent and private, sir. Source named as Sforza."

Cardon recognized the name. Maybe the Independent-Conservatives have troubles, too, he thought hopefully. Then Lancedale's video screen became the frame for an almost unbelievably commonplace set of features.

"Sforza, sir," the man in the screen said. "Sorry I'm late, but I was able to get out of the building only a few minutes ago, and I had to make sure I wasn't wearing a tail. I have two new facts.

First, the Conservatives have been bringing stormtroops in from outside, from Philadelphia, and from Wilkes-Scranton, and from Buffalo. They are being concentrated in lower Manhattan, in plain clothes, with only concealed weapons, and carrying their hoods folded up under their coats. Second, I overheard a few snatches of conversation between two of the Conservative stormtroop leaders, as follows, '... Start it in China ... thirteen-thirty,' and '... Important to make it appear either spontaneous or planned for business motives.'"

"Try to get us more information, as quickly as possible," Lancedale directed. "Obviously, we should know, by about thirteen hundred, what's being planned."

"Right, sir," Lancedale's spy at Independent-Conservative headquarters nodded and vanished from the screen.

"What does it sound like to you, Frank?" Lancedale asked.

"China is obviously a code-designation for some place in downtown Manhattan, where the Conservative goon gangs are being concentrated. The only thing I can say is that it probably is not Chinatown. They'd either say 'Chinatown' and not 'China,' or they would use some code-designation that wasn't so close to the actual name," Cardon considered. "What they're going to start, at thirteen-thirty, which is only two hours and a half from now, is probably some kind of a riot."

"A riot which could arise from business motives," Lancedale added. "That sounds like the docks, or the wholesale district, or something like that." He passed his hand rapidly over the photoelectric eye of the commo box. "Get me Major Slater," he said; and, a little later, "Major, get a platoon out to Long Island, to Chester Pelton's home; have the place searched for possible booby traps, and maintain guard there till further notice. You'll have no trouble with the servants, they're all in our pay. That platoon must not, repeat not, wear uniform or appear to have any connection with the Fraternities. Put another platoon in Pelton's store. Concealed weapons, and plain clothes. They should carry their leather helmets in shopping bags, and roam about in the store, ostensibly shopping.



And a full company, uniformed and armed with heavy weapons, alerted and ready for immediate 'copter movement." He went on to explain about the intelligence report and the conclusions drawn from it. The guards officer repeated back his instructions, and Lancedale broke the connection.

"Now, Frank," he said, "I told you that this revelation of Claire Pelton's Literacy can be turned to our advantage. There's to be a full Council meeting at thirteen hundred. Here's what I estimate Joyner and Graves will try to do, and here's what I'm going to do to counter it—"

A couple of men in the maroon uniform of Pelton's store police were waiting as Prestonby's 'copter landed on the top stage; one of them touched his cap-visor with his gas-billy in salute and said: "Literate Prestonby? Miss Pelton is expecting you; she's in her father's office. This way, if you please, sir."

He had hoped to find her alone, but when he entered the office, he saw five or six of the store personnel with her. Since opening her father's safe, she had evidently dropped all pretense of Illiteracy; there was a mass of papers spread on the big desk, and she was referring from one to another of them with the deft skill of a regular Fraternities Literate, while the others watched in fascinated horror.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Hutschnecker," she told the white-haired man in the blue and orange business suit with whom she had been talking, and laid the printed price-schedule down, advancing to meet him.

"Ralph!" she greeted him. "Frank Cardon told me you were coming. I—"

For a moment, he thought of the afternoon, over two years ago, when she had entered his office at the school, and he had recognized her as the older sister of young Ray Pelton.

"Professor Prestonby," she had begun, accusingly, "you have been teaching my brother, Raymond Pelton, to read!"

He had been prepared for that; had known that sooner or later there would be some minor leak in the security screen around the classrooms on the top floor.

"My dear Miss Pelton," he had protested pleasantly. "I think you've become overwrought over nothing. This pretense to Literacy is a phase most boys of Ray's age pass through; they do it just as they play air-pirates or hi-jackers a few years earlier. The usual trick is to memorize something heard from a record disk, and then pretend to read it from print."

"Don't try to kid me, professor. I know that Ray can read. I can prove it."

"And supposing he has learned a few words," he had parried. "Can you be sure I taught him? And if so, what had you thought of doing about it? Are you going to expose me as a corrupter of youth?"

"Not unless I have to," she had replied coolly. "I'm going to blackmail you, professor. I want you to teach me to read, too."

Now, with this gang of her father's Illiterate store officials present, a quick handclasp and a glance were all they could exchange.

"How is he, Claire?" he asked.

"Out of danger, for the present. There was a medic here, who left just before you arrived. He brought nitroceaine bulbs, and gave father something to make him sleep. He's lying down, back in his rest room." She led him to a door at the rear of the office and motioned him to enter, following him. "He's going to sleep for a couple of hours, yet."

The room was a sort of bedroom and dressing room, with a miniscule toilet and shower beyond. Pelton was lying on his back, sleeping; his face was pale, but he was breathing easily and regularly. Two of the store policemen, a sergeant and a patrolman, were playing cards on the little table, and the patrolman had a burp gun within reach.

"All right, sergeant," Claire said. "You and Gorman go out to the office. Call me if anything comes up that needs attention, in the next few minutes."

The sergeant started to protest. Claire cut him off.

"There's no danger here. This Literate can be trusted; he's a friend of Mr. Cardon's. Works at the brewery. It's all right."

The two rose and went out, leaving the door barely ajar. Prestonby and

Claire, like a pair of marionettes on the same set of strings, cast a quick glance at the door and then were in each other's arms. Chester Pelton slept placidly as they kissed and whispered endearments.

It was Claire who terminated the embrace, looking apprehensively at her slumbering father.

"Ralph, what's it all about?" she asked. "I didn't even know that you and Frank Cardon knew each other, let alone that he had any idea about us."

Prestonby thought furiously, trying to find a safe path through the tangle of Claire Pelton's conflicting loyalties, trying to find a path between his own loyalties and his love for her, wondering how much it would be safe to tell her.

"And Cardon's gone completely cloak-and-dagger-happy," she continued. "He's talking about plots against my father's life, and against me, and—"

"A lot of things are going on under cloaks, around here," he told her. "And under Literate smocks, and under other kinds of costume. And a lot of daggers are out, too. You didn't know Frank Cardon was a Literate, did you?"

Her eyes widened. "I thought I was Literate enough to spot Literacy in anybody else," she said. "No, I never even suspected—"

Somebody rapped on the door. "Miss Pelton," the sergeant's voice called. "Visi-phone call from Literates' Hall."

Prestonby smiled. "I'll take it, if you don't mind," he said. "I'm acting-chief-Literate here, now, I suppose."

She followed him as he went out into Pelton's office. When he snapped on the screen, a young man in a white smock, with the Fraternities Executive Section badge, looked out of it. He gave a slight start when he saw Prestonby.

"Literate First Class Ralph N. Prestonby, acting voluntarily for Pelton's Purchasers' Paradise during emergency," he said.

"Literate First Class Armandez, Executive Section," the man in the screen replied. "This call is in connection with the recent attack of Chester Pelton upon Literate First Class Bayne."

"Continue, understanding that we admit nothing," Prestonby told him.

"An extemporaneous session of the Council has found Pelton guilty of assaulting Literate Bayne, and has fined him ten million dollars," Armandez announced.

"We enter protest," Prestonby replied automatically.

"Wait a moment, Literate. The Council has also awarded Pelton's Purchasers' Paradise damages to the extent of ten million dollars, for losses incurred by suspension of Literate service, and voted censure against Literate Bayne for ordering said suspension without consent of the Council. Furthermore, a new crew of Literates, with their novices, guards, etcetera, is being sent at once to your store. Obviously, neither the Fraternities, nor Pelton's, nor the public, would be benefitted by returning Literate Bayne or any of his crew; he has been given another assignment."

"Thank you. And when can we expect this new crew of Literates?" Prestonby asked.

The man in the screen consulted his watch. "Probably inside of an hour. We've had to do some re-shuffling; you know how these things are handled. And if you'll pardon me, Literate; just what are you doing at Pelton's? I understood that you were principal of Mineola High School."

"That's a good question." Prestonby hastily assessed the circumstances and their implications. "I'd suggest that you ask it of my superior, Literate Lancedale, however."

The Literate in the screen blinked; that was the equivalent, for him, of anybody else's jaw dropping to his midriff.

"Well! A pleasure, Literate. Good day."

"Miss Pelton!" The man in the blue-and-orange suit was still trying to catch her attention. "Where are we going to put that stuff? Russ Latterman's out in the store, somewhere, and I can't get in touch with him."

"What did you say it was?" she replied.

"Fireworks, for the Peace Day trade. We want to get it on sale about the middle of the month."

"This was a fine time to deliver them. Peace Day isn't till the Tenth of Decem-

ber. Put them down in the fireproof vault."

"That place is full of photographic film, and sporting ammunition, and other merchandise; stuff we'll have to draw out to replace stock on the shelves during the sale," the Illiterate objected.

"The weather forecast for the next couple of days is fair," Prestonby reminded her. "Why not just pile the stuff on the top stage, beyond the control tower, and put up warning signs?"

The man—Hutschnecker, Prestonby remembered hearing Claire call him—nodded.

"That might be all right. We could cover the cases with tarpaulins."

A buzzer drew one of the Illiterates to a handpone. He listened for a moment, and turned.

"Hey, there's a Mrs. H. Armytage Zydanowycz down in Furs; she wants to buy one of those mutated-mink coats, and she's only got half a million bucks with her. How's her credit?"

Claire handed Prestonby a blackbound book. "Confidential credit-rating guide; look her up for us," she said.

Another buzzer rasped, before Prestonby could find the entry on Zydanowycz, H. Armytage; the Illiterate office worker, laying down one phone, grabbed up another.

"They're all outta small money in Notions; every son and his brother's been in there in the last hour to buy a pair of dollar shoestrings with a grand-note."

"I'll take care of that," Hutschnecker said. "Wait till I call control tower, and tell them about the fireworks."

"How much does Mrs. H. Armytage Zydanowycz want credit for?" Prestonby asked. "The book says her husband's good for up to fifteen million, or fifty million in thirty days."

"Those coats are only five million," Claire said. "Let her have it; be sure to get her thumbprint, though, and send it up here for comparison."

"Oh, Claire; do you know how we're going to handle this new Literate crew, when they get here?"

"Yes, here's the TO for Literate service." She tossed a big chart across the

desk to him. "I made a few notes on it; you can give it to whoever is in charge."

It went on, like that, for the next hour. When the new Literate crew arrived, Prestonby was delighted to find a friend, and a fellow-follower of Lancedale, in charge. Considering that Retail Merchandising was Wilton Joyner's section, that was a good omen. Lancedale must have succeeded to an extraordinary degree in imposing his will on the Grand Council. Prestonby found, however, that he would need some time to brief the new chief Literate on the operational details at the store. He was unwilling to bring Claire too prominently into the conference, although he realized that it would be a matter of half an hour, at the outside, before every one of the new Literate crew would have heard about her Literate ability. If she'd only played dumb, after opening that safe—

Finally, by 1300, the new Literates had taken over, and the sale was running smoothly again. Latterman was somewhere out in the store, helping them; Claire had lunch for herself and Prestonby sent up from the restaurant, and for a while they ate in silence, broken by occasional spatters of small-talk. Then she returned to the question she had raised and he had not yet answered.

"You say Frank Cardon's a Literate?" she asked. "Then what's he doing managing the Senator's campaign? Fifth-columning?"

He shook his head. "You think the Fraternities are a solid, monolithic, organization; everybody agreed on aims and means, and working together in harmony? That's how it's supposed to look, from the outside. On the inside, though, there's a bitter struggle going on between two factions, over policy and for control. One faction wants to maintain the *status quo*—a handful of Literates doing the reading and writing for an Illiterate public, and holding a monopoly on Literacy. They're headed by two men Wilton Joyner and Harvey Graves. Bayne was one of that faction."

He paused, thinking quickly. If Lancedale had gotten the upper hand, there was likely to be a revision of the Joyner-

Graves attitude toward Pelton. In that case, the less he said to incriminate Russell Latterman, the better. Let Bayne be the villain, for a while, he decided.

"Bayne," he continued, "is one of a small minority of fanatics who make a religion of Literacy. I believe he disposed of your father's medicine, and then deliberately goaded him into a rage to bring on a heart attack. That doesn't represent Joyner-Graves policy; it was just something he did on his own. He's probably been disciplined for it, by now. But the Joyner-Graves faction are working for your father's defeat and the re-election of Grant Hamilton.

"The other faction is headed by a man you've probably never heard of, William R. Lancedale. I'm of his faction, and so is Frank Cardon. We want to see your father elected, because the socialization of Literacy would eventually put the Literates in complete control of the government. We also want to see Literacy become widespread, eventually universal, just as it was before World War IV."

"But wouldn't that mean the end of the Fraternities?" Claire asked.

"That's what Joyner and Graves say. We don't believe so. And suppose it did? Lancedale says, if we're so incompetent that we have to keep the rest of the world in ignorance to earn a living, the world's better off without us. He says that every oligarchy carries in it the seeds of its own destruction; that if we can't evolve with the rest of the world, we're doomed in any case. That's why we want to elect your father. If he can get his socialized Literacy program adopted, we'll be in a position to load the public with so many controls and restrictions and formalities that even the most bigoted Illiterate will want to learn to read. Lancedale says, a private monopoly like ours is bad, but a government monopoly is intolerable, and the only way the public can get rid of it would be by becoming Literates, themselves."

She glanced toward the door of Pelton's private rest room.

"Poor Senator!" she said softly. "He hates Literacy so, and his own children

are Literates, and his program against Literacy is being twisted against itself!"

"But you agree that we're right and he's wrong?" Prestonby asked. "You must, or you'd never have come to me to learn to read."

"He's such a good father. I'd hate to see him hurt," she said. "But, Ralph, you're my man. Anything you're for, I'm for, and anything you're against, I'm against."

He caught her hand, across the table, forgetful of the others in the office.

"Claire, now that everybody knows—" he began.

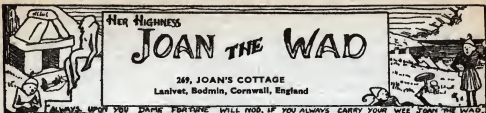
"*Top emergency! Top emergency!*" a voice brayed out of the alarm box on the wall. "*Serious disorder in Department Thirty-two! Serious disorder in Department Thirty-two!*"

The voice broke off suddenly as it had begun, but the box was not silent. From it came a medley of shouts, curses, feminine screams and splintering crashes. Prestonby and Claire were on their feet.

"You have wall screens?" he asked. "How do they work? Like the ones at school?"

Claire twisted a knob until the number 32 appeared on a dial, and pressed a button. On the screen, the Chinaware Department on the third floor came to life in full sound and color. The pickup must have been across an aisle from the box from whence the alarm had come; they could see one of Pelton's Illiterate clerks lying unconscious under it, and the handphone dangling at the end of its cord. The aisles were full of jostling, screaming women, trampling one another and fighting frantically to get out, and, among them, groups of three or four men were gathered back to back. One such group had caught a store policeman; three were holding him while a fourth smashed vases over his head, grabbing them from a nearby counter. A pink dinner plate came skimming up from the crowd, narrowly missing the wired TV pickup. A moment later, a blue-and-white sugar bowl, thrown with better aim, came curving at them in the screen. It scored a hit, and brought darkness, though the bedlam of sound continued.

—TO BE CONCLUDED—



HER HIGHNESS

# JOAN THE WAD

267, JOAN'S COTTAGE  
Lanivet, Bodmin, Cornwall, England

ALWAYS UPON YOU DAIRY FORTUNE WILL FIND, IF YOU ALWAYS CARRY YOUR WEE JOAN THE WAD

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £30 10s. Please send two more."  
E.O., Trillick, & Wals. — Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1921."

## JOAN THE WAD

SEND  
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HURRY

GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER  
FROM THE LUCKY SAINTS' WELL

is the **LUCKY CORNISH**  
**PISKEY** who Sees All, Hears  
All, Does All. **JOAN THE WAD**  
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accomplish. **JOAN THE WAD**  
is the Queen of the Lucky Corn-  
ish Piskeys and with whom  
good luck and good health  
always attend.

### AS HEALER

One lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a 'Joan the Wad' to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky Well?"

### AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a 'Joan the Wad.' We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job, and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back, and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

### AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote to inform me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

### AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting 'Joan the Wad' I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that —, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

### AS SPECULATOR

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at 'Joan the Wad.' Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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# CRUCIFIXUS ETIAM

By WALTER M. MILLER, Jr.

*Animals learned that if you killed, you could eat.  
Man moved higher; he learned that if you sowed  
in the spring, you could reap in the fall, But there's  
still a step to go.*

MANUE NANTI joined the project to make some dough. Five dollars an hour was good pay, even in 2134 A.D., and there was no way to spend it while on the job. Everything would be furnished: housing, chow, clothing, toiletries, medicine, cigarettes, even a daily ration of one hundred eighty proof beverage alcohol, locally distilled from fermented Martian mosses as fuel for the project's vehicles. He figured that if he avoided crap games, he could finish his five-year contract with fifty thousand dollars in the bank, return to Earth, and retire at the age of twenty-four. Manue wanted to travel, to see the far corners of the world, the strange cultures, the simple people, the small towns, deserts, mountains, jungles—for until he came to Mars, he had never been farther than a hundred miles from Cerro de Pasco, his birthplace in Peru.

A great wistfulness came over him in the cold Martian night when the frost haze broke, revealing the black, gleam-stung sky, and the blue-green Earth-star of his birth. *El mundo de mi carne, de mi alma*, he thought—yet, he had seen so little of it that many of its places would be more alien to him than the homogeneously ugly vistas of Mars. These he longed to see: the volcanoes of the South Pacific, the monstrous mountains of Tibet, the concrete cyclops of New York, the radio-active craters of Russia, the artificial islands in the China Sea, the Black Forest, the Ganges, the Grand Canyon—but most of all, the works of human art, the pyramids, the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, *Notre Dame du Chartres*, Saint Peter's, the tile-work wonders of Anacapri. But the dream was still a long labor from realization.

Manue was a big youth, heavy-boned and built for labor, clever in a simple

mechanical way, and with a wistful good humor that helped him take a lot of guff from whisky-breathed foremen and sharp-eyed engineers who made ten dollars an hour and figured ways for making more, legitimately or otherwise.

He had been on Mars only a month, and it hurt. Each time he swung the heavy pick into the red-brown sod, his face winced with pain. The plastic aerator valves, surgically stitched in his chest, pulled and twisted and seemed to tear with each lurch of his body. The mechanical oxygenator served as a lung, sucking blood through an artificially grafted network of veins and plastic tubing, frothing it with air from a chemical generator, and returning it to his circulatory system. Breathing was unnecessary, except to provide wind for talking, but Manue breathed in desperate gulps of the 4.0 psi Martian air; for he had seen the wasted, atrophied chests of the men who had served four or five years, and he knew that when they returned to Earth—if ever—they would still need the auxiliary oxygenator equipment.

"If you don't stop breathing," the surgeon told him, "you'll be all right. When you go to bed at night, turn the oxy down low—so low you feel like panting. There's a critical point that's just right for sleeping. If you get it too low, you'll wake up screaming, and you'll get claustrophobia. If you get it too high, your reflex mechanisms will go to pot and you won't breathe; your lungs'll dry up after a time. Watch it."

Manue watched it carefully, although the oldsters laughed at him—in their dry wheezing chuckles. Some of them could scarcely speak more than two or three words at a shallow breath.

"Breathe deep, boy," they told him. "Enjoy it while you can. You'll forget

how pretty soon. Unless you're an engineer."

The engineers had it soft, he learned. They slept in a pressurized barrack where the air was ten psi and twenty-five per cent oxygen, where they turned their oxies off and slept in peace. Even their oxies were self-regulating, controlling the output according to the carbon dioxide content of the input blood. But the Commission could afford no such luxuries for the labor gangs. The payload of a cargo rocket from Earth was only about two per cent of the ship's total mass, and nothing superfluous could be carried. The ships brought the bare essentials, basic industrial equipment, big reactors, generators, engines, heavy tools.

Small tools, building materials, foods, non-nuclear fuels—these things had to be made on Mars. There was an open pit mine in the belly of the Syrtis Major where a "lake" of nearly pure iron-rust was scooped into a smelter, and processed into various grades of steel for building purposes, tools, and machinery. A quarry in the Flathead Mountains dug up large quantities of cement rock, burned it, and crushed it to make concrete.

It was rumored that Mars was even preparing to grow her own labor force. An old-timer told him that the Commission had brought five hundred married couples to a new underground city in the Mare Erythraeum, supposedly as personnel for a local commission headquarters, but according to the old-timer, they were to be paid a bonus of three thousand dollars for every child born on the red planet. But Manue knew that the old "troffies" had a way of inventing such stories, and he reserved a certain amount of skepticism.

As for his own share in the Project he knew—and needed to know—very little. The encampment was at the north end of the Mare Cimmerium, surrounded by the bleak brown and green landscape of rock and giant lichens, stretching toward sharply defined horizons except for one mountain range in the distance, and hung over by a blue sky so dark that the Earth-star occasionally became dimly visible during the dim daytime. The encampment consisted of a dozen double-

walled stone huts, windowless, and roofed with flat slabs of rock covered over by a tarry resin boiled out of the cactuslike spineplants. The camp was ugly, lonely, and dominated by the gaunt skeleton of a drill rig set up in its midst.

Manue joined the excavating crew in the job of digging a yard-wide, six feet deep foundation trench in a hundred yard square around the drill rig, which day and night was biting deeper through the crust of Mars in a dry cut that necessitated frequent stoppages for changing rotary bits. He learned that the geologists had predicted a subterranean pocket of tritium oxide ice at sixteen thousand feet, and that it was for this that they were drilling. The foundation he was helping to dig would be for a control station of some sort.

He worked too hard to be very curious. Mars was a nightmare, a grim womanless, frigid, disinterestedly evil world. His digging partner was a sloe-eyed Tibetan nicknamed "Gee" who spoke the Omnalingua clumsily at best. He followed two paces behind Manue with a shovel, scooping up the broken ground, and humming a monotonous chant in his own tongue. Manue seldom heard his own language, and missed it; one of the engineers, a haughty Chilean, spoke the modern Spanish, but not to such as Manue Nanti. Most of the other laborers used either Basic English or the Omnalingua. He spoke both, but longed to hear the tongue of his people. Even when he tried to talk to Gee, the cultural gulf was so wide that satisfying communications was nearly impossible. Peruvian jokes were unfunny to Tibetan ears, although Gee bent double with gales of laughter when Manue nearly crushed his own foot with a clumsy stroke of the pick.

He found no close companions. His foreman was a narrow-eyed orange-browed Low German named Vögeli, usually half-drunk, and intent upon keeping his lung-power by bellowing at his crew. A meaty, florid man, he stalked slowly along the lip of the excavation, pausing to stare coldly down at each pair of laborers who, if they dared to look up, caught a guttural tongue-lashing for the moment's pause. When he had words

for a digger, he called a halt by kicking a small avalanche of dirt back into the trench about the man's feet.

Manue learned about Vögeli's disposition before the end of his first month. The aerator tubes had become nearly unbearable; the skin, in trying to grow fast to the plastic, was beginning to form a tight little neck where the tubes entered his flesh, and the skin stretched and burned and stung with each movement of his trunk. Suddenly he felt sick. He staggered dizzily against the side of the trench, dropped the pick, and swayed heavily, bracing himself against collapse. Shock and nausea rocked him, while Gee stared at him and giggled foolishly.

"Hoy!" Vögeli bellowed from across the pit. "Get back on that pick! Hoy, there! Get with it—"

Manue moved dizzily to recover the tool, saw patches of black swimming before him, sank weakly back to pant in shallow gasps. The nagging sting of the valves was a portable hell that he carried with him always. He fought an impulse to jerk them out of his flesh; if a valve came loose, he would bleed to death in a few minutes.

Vögeli came stamping along the heap of fresh earth and lumbered up to stand over the sagging Manue in the trench. He glared down at him for a moment, then nudged the back of his neck with a heavy boot. "Get to work!"

Manue looked up and moved his lips silently. His forehead glinted with moisture in the faint sun, although the temperature was far below freezing.

"Grab that pick and get started."

"Can't," Manue gasped. "Hoses—hurt."

Vögeli grumbled a curse and vaulted down into the trench beside him. "Unzip that jacket," he ordered.

Weakly, Manue fumbled to obey, but the foreman knocked his hand aside and jerked the zipper down. Roughly he unbuttoned the Peruvian's shirt, laying open the bare brown chest to the icy cold.

"No!—not the hoses, please!"

Vögeli took one of the thin tubes in his blunt fingers and leaned close to peer at the puffy, calloused nodule of irritated skin that formed around it where it

entered the flesh. He touched the nodule lightly, causing the digger to whimper.

"No, please!"

"Stop sniveling!"

Vögeli laid his thumbs against the nodule and exerted a sudden pressure. There was a slight popping sound as the skin slid back a fraction of an inch along the tube. Manue yelped and closed his eyes.

"Shut up! I know what I'm doing."

He repeated the process with the other tube. Then he seized both tubes in his hands and wiggled them slightly in and out, as if to insure a proper resetting of the skin. The digger cried weakly and slumped in a dead faint.

When he awoke, he was in bed in the barracks, and a medic was painting the sore spots with a bright yellow solution that chilled his skin.

"Woke up, huh?" the medic grunted cheerfully. "How you feel?"

"Malo!" he hissed.

"Stay in bed for the day, son. Keep your oxy up high. Make you feel better."

The medic went away, but Vögeli lingered, smiling at him grimly from the doorway. "Don't try goofing off tomorrow too."

Manue hated the closed door with silent eyes, and listened intently until Vögeli's footsteps left the building. Then, following the medic's instructions, he turned his oxy to maximum, even though the faster flow of blood made the chest-valves ache. The sickness fled, to be replaced with a weary afterglow. Drowsiness came over him, and he slept.

Sleep was a dread black-robed phantom on Mars. Mars pressed the same incubus upon all newcomers to her soil: a nightmare of falling, falling, falling into bottomless space. It was the faint gravity, they said, that caused it. The body felt buoyed up, and the subconscious mind recalled down-going elevators, and diving airplanes, and a fall from a high cliff. It suggested these things in dreams, or if the dreamer's oxy were set too low, it conjured up a nightmare of sinking slowly deeper, and deeper in cold black water that filled the victim's throat. Newcomers were segregated in a separate barracks so that their nightly screams

would not disturb the old-timers who had finally adjusted to Martian conditions.

But now, for the first time since his arrival, Manue slept soundly, airily, and felt borne up by beams of bright light.

When he awoke again, he lay clammy in the horrifying knowledge that he had not been breathing! It was so comfortable not to breathe. His chest stopped hurting because of the stillness of his rib-case. He felt refreshed and alive. Peaceful sleep.

Suddenly he was breathing again in harsh gasps, and cursing himself for the lapse, and praying amid quiet tears as he visualized the wasted chest of a troffie.

"*Heh heh!*" wheezed an oldster who had come in to readjust the furnace in the rookie barracks. "You'll get to be a Martian pretty soon, boy. I been here seven years. Look at *me*."

Manue heard the gasping voice and shuddered; there was no need to look.

"You just as well not fight it. It'll get you. Give in, make it easy on yourself. Go crazy if you don't."

"Stop it! Let me alone!"

"Sure. Just one thing. You wanta go home, you think. I went home. Came back. You will, too. They all do, 'cept engineers. Know why?"

"Shut up!" Manue pulled himself erect on the cot and hissed anger at the old-timer, who was neither old nor young, but only withered by Mars. His head suggested that he might be around thirty-five, but his body was weak and old.

The veteran grinned. "Sorry," he wheezed. "I'll keep my mouth shut." He hesitated, then extended his hand. "I'm Sam Donnell, mech-repairs."

Manue still glowered at him. Donnell shrugged and dropped his hand.

"Just trying to be friends," he muttered and walked away.

The digger started to call after him but closed his mouth again, tightly. Friends? He needed friends, but not a troffie. He couldn't even bear to look at them, for fear he might be looking into the mirror of his own future.

Manue climbed out of his bunk and donned his fleeceskins. Night had fallen, and the temperature was already twenty below. A soft sift of ice-dust obscured the stars. He stared about in the darkness.

The mess hall was closed, but a light burned in the canteen and another in the foremen's club, where the men were playing cards and drinking. He went to get his alcohol ration, gulped it mixed with a little water, and trudged back to the barracks alone.

The Tibetan was in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Manue sat down and gazed at his flat, empty face.

"Why did you come here, Gee?"

"Come where?"

"To Mars."

Gee grinned, revealing large black-streaked teeth. "Make money. Good money on Mars."

"Everybody make money, huh?"

"Sure."

"Where's the money come from?"

Gee rolled his face toward the Peruvian and frowned. "You crazy? Money come from Earth, where all money come from."

"And what does Earth get back from Mars?"

Gee looked puzzled for a moment, then gathered anger because he found no answer. He grunted a monosyllable in his native tongue, then rolled over and went to sleep.

Manue was not normally given to worrying about such things, but now he found himself asking, "What am I doing here?"—and then, "What is *anybody* doing here?"

The Mars Project had started eighty or ninety years ago, and its end goal was to make Mars habitable for colonists without Earth support, without oxies and insulated suits and the various gadgets a man now had to use to keep himself alive on the fourth planet. But thus far, Earth had planted without reaping. The sky was a bottomless well into which Earth poured her tools, dollars, manpower, and engineering skill. And there appeared to be no hope for the near future.

Manue felt suddenly trapped. He could not return to Earth before the end of his contract. He was trading five years of virtual enslavement for a sum of money which would buy a limited amount of freedom. But what if he lost his lungs, became a servant of the small aerator for the rest of his days? Worst of all: whose ends was he serving? The contractors

were getting rich—on government contracts. Some of the engineers and foremen were getting rich—by various forms of embezzlement of government funds. But what were the people back on Earth getting for their money?

Nothing.

He lay awake for a long time, thinking about it. Then he resolved to ask someone tomorrow, someone smarter than himself.

But he found the question brushed aside. He summoned enough nerve to ask Vögeli, but the foreman told him harshly to keep working and quit wondering. He asked the structural engineer who supervised the building, but the man only laughed, and said: "What do you care? You're making good money."

They were running concrete now, laying the long strips of Martian steel in the bottom of the trench and dumping in great slobbering wheelbarrowfuls of gray-green mix. The drillers were continuing their tedious dry cut deep into the red world's crust. Twice a day they brought up a yard-long cylindrical sample of the rock and gave it to a geologist who weighed it, roasted it, weighed it again, and tested a sample of the condensed steam—if any—for tritium content. Daily, he chalked up the results on a blackboard in front of the engineering hut, and the technical staff crowded around for a look. Manue always glanced at the figures, but failed to understand.

Life became an endless routine of pain, fear, hard work, anger. There were few diversions. Sometimes a crew of entertainers came out from the Mare Erythraeum, but the labor gang could not all crowd in the pressurized staff-barracks where the shows were presented, and when Manue managed to catch a glimpse of one of the girls walking across the clearing, she was bundled in fleeceskins and hooded by a parka.

Itinerant rabbis, clergymen, and priests of the world's major faiths came occasionally to the camp: Buddhist, Moslem, and the Christian sects. Padre Antonio Selni made monthly visits to hear confessions and offer Mass. Most of the gang attended all services as a diversion from routine, as an escape from nostalgia. Somehow it gave Manue a strange feeling in the pit

of his stomach to see the Sacrifice of the Mass, two thousand years old, being offered in the same ritual under the strange dark sky of Mars—with a section of the new foundation serving as an altar upon which the priest set crucifix, candles, relic-stone missal, chalice, paten, ciborium, cruets, et cetera. In filling the wine-cruet before the service, Manue saw him spill a little of the red-clear fluid upon the brown soil—wine, Earth-wine from sunny Sicilian vineyards, trampled from the grapes by the bare stamping feet of children. Wine, the rich red blood of Earth, soaking slowly into the crust of another planet.

Bowing low at the consecration, the unhappy Peruvian thought of the prayer a rabbi had sung the week before: "Blessed be the Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who makest bread to spring forth out of the Earth."

Earth chalice, Earth blood, Earth God, Earth worshippers—with plastic tubes in their chests and a great sickness in their hearts.

He went away saddened. There was no faith here. Faith needed familiar surroundings, the props of culture. Here there were only swinging picks and rumbling machinery and sloshing concrete and the clatter of tools and the wheezing of troffies. Why? For five dollars an hour and keep?

Manue, raised in a back-country society that was almost a folk-culture, felt deep thirst for a goal. His father had been a stonemason, and he had labored lovingly to help build the new cathedral, to build houses and mansions and commercial buildings, and his blood was mingled in their mortar. He had built for the love of his community and the love of the people and their customs, and their gods. He knew his own ends, and the ends of those around him. But what sense was there in this endless scratching at the face of Mars? Did they think they could make it into a second Earth, with pine forests and lakes and snow-capped mountains and small country villages? Man was not that strong. No, if he were laboring for any cause at all, it was to build a world so unearthlike that he could not love it.

The foundation was finished. There was very little more to be done until the drillers



struck pay. Manue sat around the camp and worked at breathing. It was becoming a conscious effort now, and if he stopped thinking about it for a few minutes, he found himself inspiring shallow, meaningless little sips of air that scarcely moved his diaphragm. He kept the aerator as low as possible, to make himself breathe great gasps that hurt his chest, but it made him dizzy, and he had to increase the oxygenation lest he faint.

Sam Donnell, the troffie mech-repairman, caught him about to slump dizzily from his perch atop a heap of rocks, pushed him erect, and turned his oxy back to normal. It was late afternoon, and the drillers were about to change shifts. Manue sat shaking his head for a moment, then gazed at Donnell gratefully.

"That's dangerous, kid," the troffie wheezed. "Guys can go psycho doing that. Which you rather have: sick lungs or sick mind?"

"Neither."

"I know, but—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Donnell stared at him with a faint smile. Then he shrugged and sat down on the rock heap to watch the drilling.

"Oughta be hitting the tritium ice in a couple of days," he said pleasantly. "Then we'll see a big blow."

Manue moistened his lips nervously. The troffies always made him feel uneasy. He stared aside.

"Big blow?"

"Lotta pressure down there, they say. Something about the way Mars got formed. Dust cloud hypothesis."

Manue shook his head. "I don't understand."

"I don't either. But I've heard them talk. Couple of billion years ago, Mars was supposed to be a moon of Jupiter. Picked up a lot of ice crystals over a rocky core. Then it broke loose and picked up a rocky crust—from another belt of the dust cloud. The pockets of tritium ice catch a few neutrons from uranium ore—down under. Some of the tritium goes into helium. Frees oxygen. Gases form pressure. Big blow."

"What are they going to do with the ice?"

The troffie shrugged. "The engineers might know."

Manue snorted and spat. "They know how to make money."

"Heh! Sure, everybody's gettin' rich."

The Peruvian stared at him speculatively for a moment.

"Senor Donnell, I—"

"Sam'll do."

"I wonder if anybody knows why . . . well . . . why we're really here."

Donnell glanced up to grin, then wagged his head. He fell thoughtful for a moment, and leaned forward to write in the earth. When he finished, he read it aloud.

"A plow plus a horse plus land equals the necessities of life." He glanced up at Manue. "Fifteen Hundred A.D."

The Peruvian frowned his bewilderment. Donnell rubbed out what he had written and wrote again.

"A factory plus steam turbines plus raw materials equals necessities, plus luxuries. Nineteen Hundred A.D."

He rubbed it out and repeated the scribbling. "All those things plus nuclear power and computer controls equal a surplus of everything. Twenty-One Hundred A.D."

"So?"

"So, it's either cut production or find an outlet. Mars is an outlet for surplus energies, manpower, money. Mars Project keeps money turning over, keeps everything turning over. Economist told me that. Said if the Project folded, surplus would pile up—big depression on Earth."

The Peruvian shook his head and sighed. It didn't sound right somehow. It sounded like an explanation somebody figured out after the whole thing started. It wasn't the kind of goal he wanted.

Two days later, the drill hit ice, and the "big blow" was only a fizzle. There was talk around the camp that the whole operation had been a waste of time. The hole spewed a frosty breath for several hours, and the drill crews crowded around to stick their faces in it and breathe great gulps of the helium oxygen mixture. But then the blow subsided, and the hole leaked only a wisp of steam.

Technicians came, and lowered sonar

"cameras" down to the ice. They spent a week taking internal soundings and plotting the extent of the ice-dome on their charts. They brought up samples of ice and tested them. The engineers worked late into the Martian nights.

Then it was finished. The engineers came out of their huddles and called to the foremen of the labor gangs. They led the foremen around the site, pointing here, pointing there, sketching with chalk on the foundation, explaining in solemn voices. Soon the foremen were bellowing at their crews.

"Let's get the derrick down!"

"Start that mixer going!"

"Get that steel over here!"

"Unroll that dip-wire!"

"Get a move on! Shovel that fill!"

Muscles tightened and strained, machinery clamored and rang. Voices grumbled and shouted. The operation was starting again. Without knowing why, Manue shovelled fill and stretched dip-wire and poured concrete for a big floor slab to be run across the entire hundred-yard square, broken only by the big pipe-casing that stuck up out of the ground in the center and leaked a thin trail of steam.

The drill crew moved their rig half a mile across the plain to a point specified by the geologists and began sinking another hole. A groan went up from structural boys: "Not *another* one of these things!"

But the supervisory staff said, "No, don't worry about it."

There was much speculation about the purpose of the whole operation, and the men resented the quiet secrecy connected with the project. There could be no excuse for secrecy, they felt, in time of peace. There was a certain arbitrariness about it, a hint that the Commission thought of its employees as children, or enemies, or servants. But the supervisory staff shrugged off all questions with: "You know there's tritium ice down there. You know it's what we've been looking for. Why? Well—what's the difference? There are lots of uses for it. Maybe we'll use it for one thing, maybe for something else. Who knows?"

Such a reply might have been satisfactory for an iron mine or an oil well or a

stone quarry, but tritium suggested hydrogen-fusion. And no transportation facilities were being installed to haul the stuff away—no pipelines nor railroad tracks nor glider ports.

Manue quit thinking about it. Slowly he came to adopt a grim cynicism toward the tediousness, the back-breaking labor of his daily work; he lived from day to day like an animal, dreaming only of a return to Earth when his contract was up. But the dream was painful because it was distant, as contrasted with the immediacies of Mars: the threat of atrophy, coupled with the discomforts of continued breathing, the nightmares, the barrenness of the landscape, the intense cold, the harshness of men's tempers, the hardship of labor, and the lack of a cause.

A warm, sunny Earth was still over four years distant, and tomorrow would be another back-breaking, throat-parching, heart-tormenting, chest-hurting day. Where was there even a little pleasure in it? It was so easy, at least, to leave the oxy turned up at night, and get a pleasant restful sleep. Sleep was the only recourse from harshness, and fear robbed sleep of its quiet sensuality—unless a man just surrendered and quit worrying about his lungs.

Manue decided that it would be safe to give himself two completely restful nights a week.

Concrete was run over the great square and troweled to a rough finish. A glider train from the Mare Erythraeum brought in several huge crates of machinery, cut-stone masonry for building a wall, a shipful of new personnel, and a real rarity: lumber, cut from the first Earth-trees to be grown on Mars.

A building began going up, with the concrete square for foundation and floor. Structures could be flimsier on Mars; because of the light gravity, compression-stresses were smaller. Hence, the work progressed rapidly, and as the flat-roofed structure was completed, the technicians began uncrating new machinery and moving it into the building. Manue noticed that several of the units were computers. There was also a small steam-turbine generator driven by an atomic-fired boiler.

Months passed. The building grew into

an integrated mass of power and control systems. Instead of using the well for pumping, the technicians were apparently going to lower something into it. A bomb-shaped cylinder was slung vertically over the hole. The men guided it into the mouth of the pipe casing, then let it down slowly from a massive cable. The cylinder's butt was a multi-contact socket like the female receptacle for a hundred-pin electron tube. Hours passed while the cylinder slipped slowly down beneath the hide of Mars. When it was done, the men hauled out the cable and began lowering stiff sections of pre-wired conduit, fitted with a receptacle at one end and a male plug at the other, so that as the sections fell into place, a continuous bundle of control cables was built up from "bomb" to surface.

Several weeks were spent in connecting circuits, setting up the computers, and making careful tests. The drillers had finished the second well hole, half a mile from the first, and Manue noticed that while the testing was going on, the engineers sometimes stood atop the building and stared anxiously toward the steel skeleton in the distance. Once while the tests were being conducted, the second hole began squirting a jet of steam high in the thin air, and a frantic voice bellowed from the roof top.

"Cut it! Shut it off! Sound the danger whistle!"

The jet of steam began to shriek a low-pitched whine across the Martian desert. It blended with the rising and falling *OOOO-awwww* of the danger siren. But gradually it subsided as the men in the control station shut down the machinery. All hands came up cursing from their hiding places, and the engineers stalked out to the new hole carrying Geiger counters. They came back wearing pleased grins.

The work was nearly finished. The men began crating up the excavating machinery and the drill rig and the tools. The control-building devices were entirely automatic, and the camp would be deserted when the station began operation. The men were disgruntled. They had spent a year of hard labor on what they thought to be a tritium well, but now that it was done, there were no facilities for pumping

the stuff or hauling it away. In fact, they had pumped various solutions *into* the ground through the second hole, and the control station shaft was fitted with pipes that led from lead-lined tanks down into the earth.

Manue had stopped trying to keep his oxy properly adjusted at night. Turned up to a comfortable level, it was like a drug, insuring comfortable sleep—and like addict or alcoholic, he could no longer endure living without it. Sleep was too precious, his only comfort. Every morning he awoke with a still, motionless chest, felt frightening remorse, sat up gasping, choking, sucking at the thin air with whining rattling lungs that had been idle too long. Sometimes he coughed violently, and bled a little. And then for a night or two he would correctly adjust the oxy, only to wake up screaming and suffocating. He felt hope sliding grimly away.

He sought out Sam Donnell, explained the situation, and begged the troffie for helpful advice. But the mech-repairman neither helped nor consoled nor joked about it. He only bit his lip, muttered something non-committal, and found an excuse to hurry away. It was then that Manue knew his hope was gone. Tissue was withering, tubercules forming, tubes growing closed. He knelt abjectly beside his cot, hung his face in his hands, and cursed softly, for there was no other way to pray an unanswerable prayer.

A glider train came in from the north to haul away the disassembled tools. The men lounged around the barracks or wandered across the Martian desert, gathering strange bits of rock and fossils, searching idly for a glint of metal or crystal in the wan sunshine of early fall. The lichens were growing brown and yellow, and the landscape took on the hues of Earth's autumn if not the forms.

There was a sense of expectancy around the camp. It could be felt in the nervous laughter, and the easy voices, talking suddenly of Earth and old friends and the smell of food in a farm kitchen, and old half-forgotten tastes for which men hungered: ham searing in the skillet, a cup of frothing cider from a fermenting crock, iced melon with honey and a bit

of lemon, onion gravy on homemade bread. But someone always remarked, "What's the matter with you guys? We ain't going home. Not by a long shot. We're going to another place just like this."

And the group would break up and wander away, eyes tired, eyes haunted with nostalgia.

"What're we waiting for?" men shouted at the supervisory staff. "Get some transportation in here. Let's get rolling."

Men watched the skies for glider trains or jet transports, but the skies remained empty, and the staff remained close-mouthed. Then a dust column appeared on the horizon to the north, and a day later a convoy of tractor-trucks pulled into camp.

"Start loading aboard, men!" was the crisp command.

Surly voices: "You mean we don't go by air? We gotta ride those kidney-bouncers? It'll take a week to get to Mare Ery! Our contract says—"

"Load aboard! We're not going to Mare Ery yet!"

Grumbling, they loaded their baggage and their weary bodies into the trucks, and the trucks thundered and clattered across the desert, rolling toward the mountains.

The convoy rolled for three days toward the mountains, stopping at night to make camp, and driving on at sunrise. When they reached the first slopes of the foothills, the convoy stopped again. The deserted encampment lay a hundred and fifty miles behind. The going had been slow over the roadless desert.

"Everybody out!" barked the messenger from the lead truck. "Bail out! Assemble at the foot of the hill."

Voices were growling among themselves as the men moved in small groups from the trucks and collected in a milling tide in a shallow basin, overlooked by a low cliff and a hill. Manue saw the staff climb out of a cab and slowly work their way up the cliff. They carried a portable public address system.

"Gonna get a preaching," somebody snarled.

"Sit down, please!" barked the loud-

speaker. "You men sit down there! Quiet—quiet, please!"

The gathering fell into a sulky silence. Will Kinley stood looking out over them, his eyes nervous, his hand holding the mike close to his mouth so that they could hear his weak troffie voice.

"If you men have questions," he said, "I'll answer them now. Do you want to know what you've been doing during the past year?"

An affirmative rumble arose from the group.

"You've been helping to give Mars a breathable atmosphere." He glanced briefly at his watch, then looked back at his audience. "In fifty minutes, a controlled chain reaction will start in the tritium ice. The computers will time it and try to control it. Helium and oxygen will come blasting up out of the second hole."

A rumble of disbelief arose from his audience. Someone shouted: "How can you get air to blanket a planet from one hole?"

"You can't," Kinley replied crisply. "A dozen others are going in, just like that one. We plan three hundred, and we've already located the ice pockets. Three hundred wells, working for eight centuries, can get the job done."

"Eight centuries! What good—"

"Wait!" Kinley barked. "In the meantime, we'll build pressurized cities close to the wells. If everything pans out, we'll get a lot of colonists here, and gradually condition them to live in a seven or eight psi atmosphere—which is about the best we can hope to get. Colonists from the Andes and the Himalayas—they wouldn't need much conditioning."

"What about us?"

There was a long plaintive silence. Kinley's eyes scanned the group sadly, and wandered toward the Martian horizon, gold and brown in the late afternoon. "Nothing—about us," he muttered quietly.

"Why did we come out here?"

"Because there's danger of the reaction getting out of hand. We can't tell anyone about it, or we'd start a panic." He looked at the group sadly. "I'm telling you now, because there's nothing you could do. In thirty minutes—"

There were angry murmurs in the

crowd. "You mean there may be an explosion?"

"There *will* be a limited explosion. And there's very little danger of anything more. The worst danger is in having ugly rumors start in the cities. Some fool with a slip-stick would hear about it, and calculate what would happen to Mars if five cubic miles of tritium ice detonated in one split second. It would probably start a riot. That's why we've kept it a secret."

The buzz of voices was like a disturbed beehive. Manue Nanti sat in the midst of it, saying nothing, wearing a dazed and weary face, thoughts jumbled, soul drained of feeling.

Why should men lose their lungs that after eight centuries of tomorrows, other men might breathe air of Mars as the air of Earth?

Other men around him echoed his thoughts in jealous mutterings. They had been helping to make a world in which they would never live.

An enraged scream arose near where Manue sat. "They're going to blow us up! They're going to blow up Mars."

"Don't be a fool!" Kinley snapped.

"Fools they call us! We *are* fools! For ever coming here! We got sucked in! Look at *me*!" A pale dark-haired man came wildly to his feet and tapped his chest. "Look! I'm losing my lungs! We're all losing our lungs! Now they take a chance on killing everybody."

"Including ourselves," Kinley called coldly.

"We oughta take him apart. We oughta kill every one who knew about it—and Kinley's a good place to start!"

The rumble of voices rose higher, calling both agreement and dissent. Some of Kinley's staff were looking nervously toward the trucks. They were unarmed.

"You men sit down!" Kinley barked.

Rebellious eyes glared at the supervisor. Several men who had come to their feet dropped to their haunches again. Kinley glowered at the pale upriser who called for his scalp.

"Sit down, Handell!"

Handell turned his back on the supervisor and called out to the others. "Don't be a bunch of cowards! Don't let him bully you!"

"You men sitting around Handell. Pull him down."

There was no response. The men, including Manue, stared up at the wild-eyed Handell gloomily, but made no move to quiet him. A pair of burly foremen started through the gathering from its outskirts.

"Stop!" Kinley ordered. "Turpin, Schultz—get back. Let the men handle this themselves."

Half a dozen others had joined the rebellious Handell. They were speaking in low tense tones among themselves.

"For the last time, men! Sit down!"

The group turned and started grimly toward the cliff. Without reasoning why, Manue slid to his feet quietly as Handell

## BOOKS RECEIVED....

### EARTH ABIDES by George R. Stewart

This, the first book to appear in the newly formed Science Fiction Book Club, offers a cleverly written and ingenious tale that should appeal to a great many ASTOUNDING readers.

Describing how a newly developed virus can all but destroy an entire universe, the author gives a sober and convincing picture of a slowly disintegrating system—avoiding the spectacular with telling effect.

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came near him. "Come on, fellow, let's get him," the leader muttered.

The Peruvian's fist chopped a short stroke to Handell's jaw, and the dull *thuk* echoed across the clearing. The man crumpled, and Manue crouched over him like a hissing panther. "Get back!" he snapped at the others. "Or I'll jerk his hoses out."

One of the others cursed him.

"Want to fight, fellow?" the Peruvian wheezed. "I can jerk several hoses out before you drop me!"

They shuffled nervously for a moment. "The guy's crazy!" one complained in a high voice.

"Get back or he'll kill Handell!"

They sidled away, moved aimlessly in the crowd, then sat down to escape attention. Manue sat beside the fallen man and gazed at the thinly smiling Kinley.

"Thank you, son. There's a fool in every crowd." He looked at his watch again. "Just a few minutes men. Then you'll feel the Earth-tremor, and the explosion, and the wind. You can be proud of that wind, men. It's new air for Mars, and you made it."

"But we can't breathe it!" hissed a troffle.

Kinley was silent for a long time, as if listening to the distance. "What man ever made his own salvation?" he murmured.

They packed up the public address amplifier and came down the hill to sit in the cab of a truck, waiting.

It came as an orange glow in the south, and the glow was quickly shrouded by an expanding white cloud. Then, minutes later the ground pulsed beneath them, quivered and shook. The quake subsided, but remained as a hint of vibration. Then after a long time, they heard the dull-throated roar thundering across the Martian desert. The roar continued steadily, grumbling and growling as it would do for several hundred years.

There was only a hushed murmur of awed voices from the crowd. When the wind came, some of them stood up and moved quietly back to the trucks, for now they could go back to a city for reassignment. There were other tasks to accomplish before their contracts were done.

But Manue Nanti still sat on the ground, his head sunk low, desperately trying to gasp a little of the wind he had made, the wind out of the ground, the wind of the future. But lungs were clogged, and he could not drink of the racing wind. His big calloused hand clutched slowly at the ground, and he choked a brief sound like a sob.

A shadow fell over him. It was Kinley, come to offer his thanks for the quelling of Handell. But he said nothing for a moment as he watched Manue's desperate Gethsemane.

"Some sow, others reap," he said.

"Why?" the Peruvian choked.

The supervisor shrugged. "What's the difference? But if you can't be both, which would you rather be?"

Nanti looked up into the wind. He imagined a city to the south, a city built on tear-soaked ground, filled with people who had no ends beyond their culture, no goal but within their own society. It was a good sensible question: Which would he rather be—sower or reaper?

Pride brought him slowly to his feet, and he eyed Kinley questioningly. The supervisor touched his shoulder.

"Go on to the trucks."

Nanti nodded and shuffled away. He had wanted something to work for, hadn't he? Something more than the reasons Donnell had given. Well, he could smell a reason, even if he couldn't breathe it.

Eight hundred years was a long time, but then—long time, big reason. The air smelled good, even with its clouds of boiling dust.

He knew now what Mars was—not a ten-thousand-a-year job, not a garbage can for surplus production. But an eight-century passion of human faith in the destiny of the race of Man.

He paused short of the truck. He had wanted to travel, to see the sights of Earth, the handiwork of Nature and of history, the glorious places of his planet.

He stooped, and scooped up a handful of the red-brown soil, letting it sift slowly between his fingers. Here was Mars—his planet now. No more of Earth, not for Manue Nanti. He adjusted his aerator more comfortably and climbed into the waiting truck.

# NIGHTMARE BROTHER

By ALAN E. NOURSE

*The ultimate test of a man, actually, is the test whether or not he has the strength, courage, and sheer guts to face and overcome the toughest of all opponents—his own ideas!*

HE was walking down a tunnel. At first it didn't even occur to him to wonder *why* he was walking down the tunnel, nor how he had got there, nor just what tunnel it was. He was walking quickly, with short, even steps, and it seemed, suddenly, as if he had been walking for hours.

It wasn't the darkness that bothered him at first. The tunnel wasn't bright, but it was quite light enough, for the walls glowed faintly with a bluish luminescence. Ahead of him the glowing walls stretched as far as he could see. The tunnel was about ten feet wide, and ten feet high, with smooth walls arching into a perfectly smooth curve over his head. Under his feet the floor seemed cushiony, yielding slightly to the pressure as he walked, and giving off a soft, muffled sound in perfect measure to his tread. It was a pleasant, soothing sound, and he hardly thought to wonder at all just what he was doing. It was quite obvious, after all. As simple as simple could be. He was walking down a tunnel.

But then little tendrils of caution and question crept into his mind, and a puzzled frown crossed his quiet face. He stopped abruptly, standing stock-still in the tunnel as he squinted at the glowing walls in growing confusion. What a very odd place to be, he thought. A tunnel! He glanced about him, and cocked his head, listening for a long moment, until the stark silence of the place chilled him, forced him to sniff audibly, and scratch his head, and turn around.

My name is Robert Cox, he thought, and I am walking down a tunnel. He pondered for a moment, trying to remember. How long had he been walking? An hour? He shook his head. It must have been longer than that. Oddly, he couldn't remember *when* he had started walking. How had he got here? What had he been

doing before he came into the tunnel? A chill of alarm crept up his spine as his mind groped. What had happened to his memory? Little doors in his mind seemed to snap quickly shut even as his memory approached them. Ridiculous, he thought, to be walking down a tunnel without even knowing where it was leading—

He peered forward in the silence. Quite suddenly he realized that he was absolutely alone. There was not a sound around him, not a stir, no sign of another human being, not even a flicker of life of any kind. The chill deepened, and he walked cautiously over to one wall, tapped it with his knuckles. Only a dull knock. For the merest fraction of a second an alarm rang in his mind, a cold, sharp intimation of deadly danger. He chuckled, uneasily. There was really no reason to be alarmed. A tunnel had to have an end, somewhere.

And then he heard the sound, and stared wide-eyed down the tunnel. It came to his ears very faintly, at first, the most curious sort of airy whistling, like a shrill pipe in the distance. It cut through the stillness cleanly, like a razor, leaving a strange tingle of dread in his mind. He listened, hardly breathing. Was the light growing fainter? Or were his eyes not behaving? He blinked, and sensed the light dimming even as the whistling sound grew louder and nearer, mingling with another, deeper sound. A throbbing roar came to his ears, overpowering the shrillness of the whistle, and then he saw the light, far down the tunnel, a single, round, yellow light, directly in the center of the passage, growing larger and larger as the roar intensified. A sharp wind suddenly stirred his dark hair as he stared fascinated by the yellow light bearing down on him. In a horrible flash, an image crossed his mind—the image of a man trapped on a railroad track as a dark engine approached with whistle scream-

ing, bearing down like some hideous monster out of the night.

A cry broke from the man's lips. *It was a train!* Roaring down the tunnel toward him, it was moving like a demon, with no tracks, screeching its warning as it came, with the light growing brighter and brighter, blinding him. Relentlessly it came, filling the entire tunnel from side to side, hissing smoke and fire and steam from its valves, its whistle shrieking—

With a scream of sheer terror, Cox threw himself face down on the floor, trying frantically to burrow deeper into the soft matt of the tunnel floor, closing his mind down, blanking out everything but horrible, blinding fear. The light blazed to floodlight brilliance, and with a fearful rush of wind the roar rose to a sudden thundering bellow over his head. Then it gave way to the loud, metallic *clak-clak-clak* of steel wheels on steel rails beside his ears, and faded slowly into the distance behind him.

Trembling uncontrollably in every muscle, Cox stirred, trying to rise to his knees, groping for control of his mind. His eyes were closed tightly, and suddenly the floor was no longer soft matting, but a gritty stuff that seemed to run through his fingers.

He opened his eyes with a start, and a little cry came to his lips. The tunnel was gone. He was standing ankle-deep in the steaming sand of a vast, yellow desert, with a brassy sun beating down from a purple sky. He blinked, unbelieving, at the yellow dunes, and a twisted Joshua tree blinked back at him not ten feet away.

Two men and a girl stood in the room, watching the motionless body of the dark-haired man sprawled on the bed. The late afternoon sun came in the window, throwing bright yellow panels across the white bedspread, but the man lay quite still, his pale eyes wide open and glassy, oblivious to anything in the room. His face was deathly pale.

The girl gasped. "I think he's stopped breathing," she whispered.

The taller of the men, dressed in white, took her by the shoulder, gently turning her face away. "He's still breathing," he reassured her. "You shouldn't be here.

Mary. You should go home, try to get some rest. He'll be all right."

The other man snorted, his pink face flushed with anger. "He shouldn't be here either," he hissed, jerking a thumb at the man on the bed. "I tell you, Paul, Robert Cox is not the man. I don't care what you say. He'll never get through."

Dr. Paul Schiml drew a deep breath, turning to face the other. "If Cox can't get through, there isn't a man in the Hoffman Medical Center who can—or ever will. You know that."

"I know that there were fifty others in the same training program who were better fitted for this than Bob Cox!"

"That's not true." Dr. Schiml's voice was sharp in the still room. "Reaction time, ingenuity, opportunism—not one in the group could hold a candle to Bob." He stared down at the red-faced man, his eyes glittering angrily. "Admit it, Connover. You're not worried for Bob Cox's sake. You're worried for your own neck. You've been afraid since the start, since the first ships came back to Earth, because you've been in charge of a program you don't believe in, and you're afraid of what will happen if Bob Cox doesn't come through. It wouldn't matter who was on that bed—you'd still be afraid." He sniffed in disgust. "Well, you needn't worry. Bob Cox will do it, if anyone can. He *has* to."

"And if he *doesn't* get through?"

The tall doctor stared angrily for a moment, then turned abruptly and walked over to the bedside. There was hardly a flicker of life in the man who lay there, only the shallowest respiration to indicate that he *was* alive. With gentle fingers Dr. Schiml inspected the small incision in the man's skull, checked again the multitude of tiny, glittering wires leading to the light panel by the bedside. He stopped, staring at the panel, and motioned sharply to Connover. "Here's the first already," he whispered.

For a moment, only the faintest buzz of sound could be heard from the panel; then Connover let out a soft whistle. "A tunnel. That makes sense. But what a device—" He turned wide-eyed to Schiml. "He could kill himself!"

"Of course he could. We've known that from the start."

"But *he* doesn't know—"

"He doesn't know anything," Schiml pointed to the panel. "A train. Ingenious? It's amazing. Could you think of anything worse?" He watched for a moment. "No room on either side for escape—he'll go under it."

All three watched, hardly breathing. Suddenly the girl was sobbing uncontrollably, burying her face on the doctor's shoulder. "It's horrible," she choked. "It's horrible . . . he'll never make it, never, he'll be killed—"

"No, Mary, not Robert. Not after the training he's had." The doctor's voice was grim. "You've got to believe that, Mary. This is the test, the final test. He can't let us down, not now—"

He could feel danger all about him. It was nothing at all tangible, just a deep, hollow voice in his mind, screaming out the danger. Cox shuddered, and glanced up at the brassy yellow sun, his forehead wet with perspiration. It was hot! Steaming hot, with an unrelenting heat that seemed to melt him down inside like soft wax. Every muscle in his body was tense; he stood poised, tingling, his pale eyes searching the barren yellow dunes of sand for the danger he knew was there—

Then the Joshua tree moved.

With a gasp, he threw himself on the sand, ten feet from it, watching it wide-eyed. Just a slight movement of the twisted arms of the thing—he could have been mistaken, his mind could have played tricks. He trembled as he squinted through the shimmering heat at the gaunt, twisted tree.

And then, quite suddenly, realization struck him. Desert! He had been in a *tunnel*—yes, that was right, a tunnel, and that light, that roaring thing—*what was he doing here?* He sat up slowly in the sand, ran his fingers through the hot grains, studying them with infinite curiosity. No doubt about it—it *was* desert! But how? How had he reached the tunnel in the first place? And what in the rational universe could have transported him to *this* place?

Eagerly his mind searched, striking against the curious, shadowy shield that blocked his memory. There was an

answer, he knew; something was wrong, he shouldn't be there. Deep in his mind he knew he was in terrible danger, but such *idiotic* danger—if he could only think, somehow remember—

His shoulders tensed, and he froze, reactively, his eyes on the yellow mound of sand across the ridge from him. Hardly breathing, he watched, his mind screaming *danger, danger*, his eyes focusing on the yellow hillock. Then it moved again, swiftly, in the blinking of an eye, and froze again, ten feet closer—

It had looked in that fraction of a second, remarkably like a *cat*—a huge, savage, yellow cat. And then it had frozen into a hillock of sand.

Swiftly Cox moved, on hands and knees, at angles across the slope of sand from the thing. The sand burned his hands, and he almost cried out as the grit swirled up into his eyes, but he watched, every muscle tense. It moved again, at a tangent, swiftly sliding down the slope parallel to his movement, a huge, yellow, fanged thing, moving with the grace and flowing speed of molten gold, little red eyes fixed on him. Then it froze again, melting into the yellow, shimmering sand.

Stalking him!

In blind panic he pulled himself to his feet and ran down the sandy slope away from it, his eyes burning, running with the devil at his heels until a dune lay between him and the creature. Then he threw himself flat on the sand, peering over the rim of the dune. There was a swift blur of yellow movement, and the sand-cat was on the slope behind him, twenty yards closer, crouching against the sand, panting, hungrily. Frantically, Cox glanced around him. Nothing! Nothing but yellow, undulating sandhills, the scorching sun, and the tall, twisted Joshua trees that moved! He looked back suddenly, and saw the sand-cat creeping toward him, slowly, slowly, not thirty yards away.

His breath came in panting gasps as he watched the creature. It was eight feet long, with lean, muscular haunches that quivered in the sun, the red eyes gleaming in savage hate. It moved with a sure confidence, a relentless certainty of its kill. Cox tried to think, tried to clear his mind

of the fear and panic that gnawed at him, tried to clear away the screaming, incredulous puzzlement that tormented him. He had to get away, but he couldn't run. The creature was too fast. He knew his presence there was incredible; something in his mind tried to tell him not to believe it, that it wasn't true—but he felt the gritty sand under his sweating palms, and it was very, very real. And the sand-cat moved closer—

In a burst of speed he ran zigzagging down the slope and up the next, watching over his shoulder for the flash of yellow movement. With each change in direction, the sand-cat also shifted, stalking faithfully. If only he could get out of its sight for a moment! If it wasn't too bright, if that savage brain were starved enough, he might force it into a pattern response—He ran ten feet to the right, paused, and rushed on ten feet to the left, heading toward the huge boulder which stood up like a naked sentinel on the dune ahead. The sand-cat followed, moving to the right, then to the left. Again Cox sped, sure now that the pattern would be followed, moving right, then left. A long run away from the rock, then a long run toward it. The cat was closer, just twenty yards away closing the distance between them with each run. Panting, Cox tried to catch his breath, taking a steel grip on his nerves. He knew that panic could kill him. Swiftly, he scuttled up over the edge of the dune, far to the right of the boulder, then abruptly switched back, keeping the boulder between him and the cat, reaching it, peering cautiously around—

Warm excitement flooded his mind. Slowly, ever so slowly the sand-cat was edging up over the dune, peering down in the direction he had run, slipping up over the dune on its belly, freezing, peering, a savage, baffled snarl coming from its dripping mouth. Eagerly Cox searched the sand around the boulder, picked up a chunk of sandstone as big as a brick. Then he took a huge breath, and plunged from behind the boulder, toward the cat, moving silently in the soft, hot sand. With a mixture of fury and fear he fell on the beast, raising the stone, bringing it down with all his might on the flat yellow head. The sand-cat snarled and whirled, claws

slashing the air; his hot, rank breath caught Cox full, gagging him as he raised the stone again and again, bringing it down on the creature's skull. Razor claws ripped at his side, until the cat screamed and convulsed, and lay twitching—

And suddenly there was darkness, and a cold winter breeze in his face, and the stars were twinkling in the frigid night air above him. The sand-cat was gone, the desert, the Joshua trees. He lay in a ditch, half-soaked in icy mud, and his side was bleeding angrily.

He stared around him, and shivered. He was at the bottom of a ditch, his body lying in an icy rivulet of water. Above him, he could see the embankment, topped by a small iron fence. A road! Painfully he dragged himself up toward the top, peered over. The strip of polished metal gleamed in the starlight, as icy gusts of wind and snow swept down to bite his ears and bring tears to his eyes. The tears froze on his eyelids, and the sharp coldness of the dark air bit into his lungs, bringing pain with every breath.

In the distance he heard a rumbling sound, felt the road tremble as the gargantuan vehicles approached. Instinctively Cox ducked below the road surface, froze immobile as the long line of grotesque metallic monsters roared by, glimmering within their dull fluorescent force-shields. They showed no sign of life, but rumbled past him, moving steadily down the glittering highway. He could see the curious turrets, the gunlike projections, stark against the bleak night sky. Weapons, he thought, huge, tanklike engines which lumbered and roared along the road on some errand of death. Suddenly the last of the convoy lumbered past, and he eased himself cautiously up onto the road. A burst of thunder roared in his ears, and abruptly it began to pour, huge icy drops that splattered with the force of machine-gun bullets, stinging his skin and soaking his hair and clothes. He shuddered, miserably, his mind groping in confusion. If he could only find a place to *think*, somewhere to rest and collect himself, somewhere to try to dress the wound in his side. In the gloom across the road he thought he could make out the gaunt ruins



of a building standing against the starlight, and with infinite pain and slowness he dragged himself across the frigid steel strip, and down into the ditch on the other side. His feet were growing numb, and the pain in his side had turned to a dull, angry throbbing, but he somehow stumbled and staggered across the field, every ounce of his strength focused on reaching some sort of shelter.

It was a building—or it had been, once. Two walls had been completely shattered, bombed out, and the roof had fallen in, but one intact wall stood like a gaunt sentinel in the darkness. Inside, the building had been gutted by fire, and Cox was forced to rip rubble and debris away from the door. He forced it open on squeaking, long-neglected hinges. Finally he found a corner that was dry, and located a bit of blanket from the rubble inside. He sank into the corner, shaking his head, trying desperately to orient himself.

His side had stopped bleeding. A quick examination revealed four shallow, ugly-looking lacerations running down his thigh. Four claws—the cat! Of course, the sand-cat had clawed him in its last, desperate snarl of rage. Cox leaned back, scratching his black hair with a grimy finger. The sand-cat was in the *desert*, not *here*. But before that, it was a tunnel, with a roaring train bearing down on him, a train that moved without tracks. And now, a frigid, war-beaten world—

It didn't add up. Desperately he tried to remember what had happened in between. Nothing, it seemed. He had slipped from one to the other in the blinking of an eye. But that was impossible! You just couldn't shift like that, from one place to another. At least—he didn't *think* it was possible.

He heard his breath, short and shallow, echoing in the silence of the ruined building. He was here. This building was real, the icy coldness and the darkness were very real. But the wound in his side, was real, too. That hadn't happened here, that had happened somewhere else. How had he come here? Had he *wanted* to come? He shook his head angrily. It was ridiculous. But three different places—there *had* to be something in common, some common denominator.

What had he found in all three places that was the same, what possible connection was there?

*Danger!* He sat bolt upright, staring into the blackness. That was it! A tunnel, and danger. A desert, and danger. Now this cold, hostile place, *and danger!* Not danger to anyone else, just danger to himself. *Pure, raw, naked danger.*

He pondered for a while, his mind whirling. Somehow, it seemed that danger had been his entire life, that all he could think of, the only thing he had ever known was danger. Could that be true? Instinctively, he knew it wasn't. There *had* been peace, before, somewhere, and love, and happy hours. But superimposed in his mind was the acute, barren awareness of imminent death, a sure knowledge that he could die here, abruptly, at any moment, and only his own resourcefulness could save him.

It was like repeating the well-rehearsed words of a play. Somebody had told him that. It wasn't original in his own mind. It was propaganda, conditioned information, something he had been *taught!*

*Could Mary have told him?*

He gasped. Mary! He repeated the name over and over, excitedly. There was the link. Mary, his wife—certainly there had been peace, and warmth, and comfort, and love. Mary was his wife, he had known those things with her, in some remote corner of his memory. He felt himself glow as he suddenly remembered Mary's lovely face, the depth of love in those dark eyes, the warmth of her arms around him, the consuming peace and contentment in her sweet kisses and soft, happy murmurings—somewhere there had been Mary, who loved him beyond anything in the world.

The wind stirred through the ruined building, bringing a sifting of damp snow into his face. There was no Mary here. Somehow, he was here, and he was in danger, and there was no warmth nor love here. His mind swept back to reality with a jolt. He hadn't wanted to come here. It *couldn't* have been his will. There was only one other possible answer. *He had been put here.*

His mind struck the idea, and trembled. Like the fit of a hand in a glove, the

thought settled down in his mind, filling a tremendous gap. Yes, that was it, he had been placed here, for some reason. He wasn't willfully changing from place to place, against his will and volition. From danger into danger, he was being shifted, like a chessman in some horrible game of death. But no one was touching him, no one was near him—how could these changes be happening? The answer sent a chill through him and his hand trembled. It was obvious. The changes were happening in his own mind.

He rubbed his stubbled chin. If this were true, then these things weren't really happening. He hadn't actually been in the tunnel. There hadn't actually been a sand-cat. He wasn't really lying here in a cold, damp corner, with deadly frost creeping up his legs. Angrily he rejected the thought. There was no room for doubt, these things were real, all right. The slashes on his side were real. He knew, beyond shadow of a doubt, that there *had* been a sand-cat. He knew it would have killed him if it could have, and if it had, he would have been quite dead.

*You can die, and only your own resourcefulness will save you*—who had said that? There had been a program, training him, somewhere, for something—something vastly important. His mind groped through the darkness, trying to penetrate the fuzzy uncertainty of his memory. Those words—from a small, red-faced man, and a tall, gaunt man in white—*Schiml!* Schiml had said those words, Schiml had put him here!

Suddenly he thought he saw the whole thing clearly. He was in danger, he must overcome the danger, he wasn't supposed to know that it wasn't really happening! There had been a long training program, with Connover, and Schiml, and all the rest, and now he was on his own. But nothing, *nothing* could really hurt him, because these things were only figments of his imagination.

He shivered in the coldness. Somehow, he didn't quite dare to believe that.

Dr. Schiml sat down on the chair and wiped drops of perspiration from his brow. His eyes were bright with excite-

ment as he glanced at the pallid form on the bed, and then back at the red-faced Connover. "He's taken the first step," he said hoarsely. "I was sure he would."

Connover scowled and nodded, his eyes fixed on the panel beside the bed. "Yes, he took the first step all right. He's figured out the source of his environment. That's not very much."

Schiml's eyes gleamed. "When we first computed the test, you wouldn't even concede the possibility of that. Now you see that he's made it. He'll make the other steps, too."

Connover whirled angrily on the doctor. "How can he? He just *doesn't have the data!* Any fool could deduct that these are subjective mental phenomena he's facing, under the circumstances. But you're asking for the impossible if you expect him to go any further along that line of reasoning. He just doesn't have enough memory of reality to work with."

"He has Mary, and you, and me," the doctor snapped. "He knows there's been a training program, and he knows that he's being tested. And now he knows that he's living in the nightmares of his own mind. He's got to solve the rest."

Connover snorted. "And that knowledge itself increases his danger a thousand times. He'll be reckless, over confident—"

The girl stirred. She had been staring blankly at the man on the bed; her face was drawn and pallid, and her eyes were red. She looked dully at Dr. Schiml. "Connover's right," she said. "He has no way of knowing. He may just stand there and let himself—" she broke off with a choked sob.

Mary, can't you see? That's exactly what we've got to know. We've got to know if the training was valid. He may get reckless, true, but never *too* reckless. The cat, remember? It hurt him. It *really* hurt him. He'll take the next step, all right. He may be hurt first, but he'll take it."

The girl's face flushed angrily. "It may kill him! You're asking too much, he's not a superman, he's just an ordinary, helpless human being like anybody else. He doesn't have any magical powers."

The doctor's face was pale. "That's

right. But he does have some very unmagical powers, powers we've been drumming into his mind for the past year. He'll just have to use them, that's all. He'll have to."

Mary's eyes shifted once again to the motionless form on the bed. "How much proof do you need?" she asked softly. "How much more will he have to take before you stop it and bring him back?"

The doctor's eyes drifted warily to Connover, then back to Mary. A little smile crept onto his lips. "Don't worry," he said gently, "I'll stop it soon enough. Just as soon as he's taken the necessary steps. But not until then."

"And if he can't make them?"

She didn't see his hand tremble as he adjusted the panel light gently. "Don't worry," he said again. "He can make them."

Gradually the numbness crept up Robert Cox's legs. He lay on the cold, grimy floor of the ruined building, staring into the blackness about him. His realization had brought him great relief; he was breathing more easily now, and he felt his mind relaxing from the strain he had been suffering. He knew, without question, that he was not in the midst of reality—that this cold, hostile place was *not* real, that it was merely some horrid nightmare dredged from the hidden depths of his own mind, thrust at him for some reason that he could not ponder, but thrust at him as an idiotic, horrible substitute for reality. Deep in his mind something whispered that no harm could really come. The sense of danger which pervaded his mind was false, a figment of the not-real world around him. They were testing him; it was quite obvious, though he couldn't pierce the murky shield of memory to understand why they were testing him, for what purpose. Still, having realized the unreality, the test must be ended. He couldn't be fooled any longer. He smiled to himself. Armed with that knowledge, there was no longer any danger. No real danger. Even the wound in his side was imagined, not really there—

And still the cold crept up his legs, insidiously, numbing them, moving higher

# PSORIASIS

Whatever the extent, and it may be anything from two or three small spots on elbows and knees to large patches on the scalp, body and limbs. Psoriasis is always most distressing and embarrassing to the sufferer.

Psoriasis forms a white lustrous scale on a reddened area of skin. Both the scale and skin are always dry unless broken or brought away by too much force when scratching or combing.

In most cases the reddened skin is of a normal temperature and the scale thick and raised on the skin, especially on the scalp, elbows and knees. Where the skin is of finer texture as on the body, scaling takes place as thin flakes or a light powder. In severe cases all the scales—thick, thin, flake or powder—will come away in shoals.

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and higher in his body. He didn't move. He simply waited. Because with the test all over, they would surely bring him back to reality.

Like an icy microtome blade, something slashed at his brain, swiftly, without warning. He screamed out, and his mind jerked and writhed in agony at the savage blow. He tried to sit upright, and found his muscles numb, paralyzed. Again the blow came, sharper, more in focus, striking with a horrid power that almost split his brain. He screamed again, closing his eyes tight, writhing on the floor. He tensed, steeling himself for another blow, and when it came his whole body jerked as he felt his own mental strength trying to rally like a protective barrier.

Frantically, he twisted and wriggled the upper part of his body, desperately and unthinkingly trying to stand and run, and toppled over onto his face in the rubble. Again the blow came, grating and screaming into his mind with an unrelenting savagery that baffled and appalled him. Twisting along the floor, he gained the door, peered sickly out into the blackness.

He could barely make out the gray shape of one of the steel monoliths he had seen rumbling down the road a little before. It was resting on the rocky, frozen tundra of the field, standing motionless, the glow of power surrounding it like a ghostly aurora. He knew that the attack came from there, frightening, paralyzing bolts that shook him and sent his mind reeling helplessly, an attack of undreamed-of ferocity. He struggled, trying to erect some sort of mental patchwork against the onslaught. He had been wrong, he

could be harmed, the test wasn't over—but why this horrible, jolting torture? Again and again the jolts came, until he screamed, and writhed, and waited in agonized anticipation of the next, and the next.

Then suddenly he felt his mind sucked down into a pool of velvet-soft warmth, of gentle sweetness, a welter of delightful tenderness. His mind wavered in sweet relief, relaxed to the throbbing, peaceful music that whirled through his mind, sinking easily into the trap—and then, abruptly, another savage blow, out of nowhere, threw him into a curled, agonized heap on the floor. *No, no, no*, his mind screamed, *don't give up, fight it*, and he fought to reinforce a barrier of protection, tried feebly to strike back at the hideous, searing blows. This isn't real, he thought to himself, this isn't really happening, this is a ridiculous, impossible nightmare, and it *couldn't possibly hurt him*—but it was hurting him, terribly, until he couldn't stand it, he couldn't—Another blow came, more caustic, digging sharp, taloned fingers into his brain, wrenching and twisting it beyond endurance.

*He was going to die!* He knew it, in a horrible flash of realization. Whatever was out there in the field was going to kill him, going to wrench him into a blubbing mass of quivering protoplasm without mind, without life—*like the men who had come back on the starship*.

He took a gasping breath. Miraculously, he felt another link in the chain fall into place. *The starship*—he had seen it, sometime so long ago. Somewhere back in a remote corner of his mind he could remember the starship which had returned, after so many years, to its home on Earth, a gaunt, beaten hulk of a ship, with the lifeless, trampled men who had started it on its voyage. Men who were alive, but barely alive, men with records of unimaginable horror on their instruments, and nothing but babbling drivel coming from their lips. Men who had gone to the stars, and met alien savagery with which they could not cope; men who had been jolted from their lethargy into naked, screaming madness at the thought of ever, ever going back—

Was *this* why he was being tested?

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Was this why he had been trained, subjected to this mind-wrenching, gruelling ordeal? Another searing blow struck him, scraping at the feeble strength he had left, benumbing him, driving the picture from his mind. Was *this* what those men had faced? Was it *this* that had destroyed them, so infinitely far from their home, so very much alone on some alien world? Or was it something else, something a hundred-fold more horrible? He reeled and screamed, as anger beat through to his consciousness, a certain awareness that imagination or not, the danger was *real*, so horribly real that he was falling apart under the onslaught, reaching that limit of his endurance beyond which was certain death.

Coldly, he searched for a weapon, coldly struggled to erect a shield to block the horrible blows—to fight horror with horror, to die fighting if need be. Bitterly, he closed off his mind to hate and fear, dipped into the welter of horror and hatred in his mind, something to match and conquer the monstrosity he was facing. With a howl of rage he sent out searing pictures of everything he knew of savagery, and hellish violence, and diabolical hatred and destruction, matching the alien onslaught blow for blow.

They could try to kill him, he knew they *could* kill him, and he fought them with all the strength of mental power he could drag from his brain, feeling the balance between his mind and the shrieking horror from the field rise, and sway, like a teeter-totter, back and forth, up and down, until somewhere he heard a scream, fading into silence, a scream of alien fear and hatred and defeat.

And then he sank to the floor in exhaustion, his lips moving feebly as he groaned, "I've got to fight them, or they'll kill me. They'll kill me. They'll kill me."

The girl's sobs echoed in the silent room. "Oh, stop it," she groaned, "stop it, Paul, please—he can't go on. Oh, it's horrible—"

"I've had about as much as I want to watch," Connover rasped hoarsely. His face had gone very pale, and he looked ill. "How can you go on with this?"

"It's not me that's going on with it."

Dr. Schiml's voice was quiet. "I'm not concocting these things. All I'm doing is applying tiny stimuli to tiny blocks of neural tissue. Nothing more. The rest comes from his own mind—"

Mary turned to him, fiercely. "How could that be true? How could there be such . . . such horror in his mind? *That* isn't Robert, you know that. Robert's kind, and fine, and gentle—how could he find such nightmares in his mind?"

"Everyone has nightmares in his mind, Mary. Even you. And everyone has the power of death in his mind."

"But he's taken all the steps we planned," Connover cried. "What more do you expect?"

"Some of the steps," Schiml corrected angrily. "Connover, do you want to throw all these months of work out the window? Of course he's come a long way. He's realized that he's in danger that *can* kill him—that was desperately important—and he realizes the reason that he's being tested too, though he hasn't actually rationalized it out in that way. He's beginning to realize why the starships failed. And he's realizing that he really *must* fight for survival. From the evidence he started with, he's gone a long way—a remarkably long way. Without the training, he wouldn't have survived the tunnel. But we can't stop now. He hasn't even approached the most vital realization of all. He's too strong, too confident, not desperate enough. I can't help him, Connover. He's got to do it himself."

"But he can't survive another attack like the last," Connover snapped. "Training or no training, no man could. You're deliberately letting him kill himself, Paul. Nobody could survive more of that—"

"He'll *have* to. The crews of the starships couldn't face what they found out there. That's why they came back—the way they did."

Connover's face was working. "Well, I wash my hands of it. I'm telling you to stop now. If that boy dies"—he glared at the tall doctor—"I won't be responsible."

"But you agreed—"

"Well, I've stopped agreeing. It's going too far."

Schiml stared at him for a long moment



in disgust. Then he sighed. "If that's the way it's going to be"—he glanced helplessly at the girl—"I'll take full responsibility. But I've got to finish."

"And if he dies?"

Schimpl's eyes were dull. "It's very simple," he said. "If he dies, we'll never have another chance. There'll never be another starship."

He couldn't tell how long he had been unconscious. Groggily, he raised his head, wincing as the pain stabbed through his brain, and blinked at the reflection of himself in the cold, mirror-steel wall. He stared at the reflection, startled to recognize himself. Robert Cox, his black hair muddy and caked, his face scratched in livid, grimy welts, his eyes red with strain and fatigue. With a groan, he rolled over on the polished floor, staring. Hesitantly he rubbed his side; the pain was still there, sharp under his probing fingers, and his head ached violently. But the room—

Then he knew there had been another change. The room was perfectly enclosed, without a break, or window, or seam. It was a small, low-ceilinged room, with six sides—each side a polished mirror. The ceiling and floor also reflected his image as he struggled to his feet and sniffed the faint, sharp ozone-smell of the room. In the mirrors, a hundred Robert Coxes struggled unsteadily to their feet, blinking stupidly at him and at each other. A hundred haggard, grimy Robert Coxes, from every angle, from behind and above, re-reflecting in the brilliant glow of the room.

And then he heard the scream. A long, piercing, agonized scream that reverberated from the walls of the room, nearly splitting his eardrums. It came again, louder, more piercing. Cox involuntarily clapped his fingers to his ears, but the sound came through them, pounding his skull. And then he heard the grinding sound along with the scream, a heavy, pervading grate of heavy-moving machinery, grinding, clanking, squealing in his ears. The scream came again, louder, more urgent, and a maddening whir joined the grating machinery. Cox stood poised in the center of the room, waiting, wary, ready for any sort of attack, his whole body geared to meet anything that came

to threaten him. Deep in his mind a weariness was growing, a smoldering anger, at himself for being a party to this constantly-altering torture, at Dr. Schimpl, and Connover, and anyone else who had a hand in this. What did they want? What conceivable point could there be to these attacks, this horrible instability? Why should he be subjected to such dangers that could kill him so easily? He felt a weakness, a terrible feeling that he couldn't go on, that he would have to lie down on the floor and be killed, that his limit was approaching, as he stood poised, fists clenched, waiting. How much could a man stand? What were they getting at, what did they want of him? And beyond all else, *when were they going to stop it?*

The thought broke off abruptly as a creeping chill slid up his spine, and he stared at the mirror opposite his face, almost gagging. He blinked at the image, then pawed at himself, unbelieving. Something was happening to him. Somehow, he wasn't the same any more—

Another scream cut through the air, a harsh, horrible whine of pain and torture, sending chills up his back as he winced. The image of him was different, somehow, melting and twisting before his eyes as he watched. Fascinated, he saw his hand melting away, twisting and turning into a tentacled slimy mess of writhing worms. He tore his eyes from the image, and glanced down at the hand—and a scream tore from his own throat. His cry echoed and re-echoed, as if every mirror image was screaming too, mocking him. No, he thought, *no*—it can't be happening, it *can't!* The room rumbled about him, with the cracking, grating sound of machinery with sand in its gears, and the screams pierced out again and again. Now the arm was changing, too, twisting like something independently alive—

*He had to get out of that room!* With a scream of helpless rage he threw himself against the mirror, heard it give a strained twang as he bounced back in a heap on the floor. His mind raced, seeking a way out; his eyes peered about, searching for a door, but there was nothing but mirrors, mirrors doing hideous things to his arm, creeping toward his shoulder. Every time he looked for a door in one

wall, he could see nothing but the reflection of another wall, and another. Down on his hands and knees, he crept about the room—four, five, six walls—was it seven and eight? Or was he repeating? He couldn't tell. Every glance drew his eyes back to the horrible, changing arm, until with superhuman control he reached down, seized the writhing thing with his good hand, and wrenched it away, a twisting, quivering, jellylike mass. And the stump continued to melt and change, and he couldn't see anything but the mirror.

A thought slid through his mind, and he caught it, frantically, a straw in the wind. Reflection. He couldn't see anything but the reflection. How many walls? He couldn't count. He couldn't be sure. But he had to get out of that room, he *had* to get out! He closed his eyes, closing out some of the brilliant light, bringing the piercing screams still closer to his mind. Slowly, painfully, he backed up to the wall of the room, keeping his eyes tightly closed, refusing to follow his actions in the mirrors, groping behind with his good arm, seeking over the smooth surface—

A crack. Follow it. Smoothness—then metal. A knob! With a cry that was half a sob of relief he twisted the knob, felt the wall give, slipped outside onto rough, uneven ground with his eyes still closed, and slammed the door behind him. He stood panting as the grinding and the screams peeled away like a cloak, leaving him in absolute, almost palpable silence.

There was light. He opened his eyes, then closed them again with a swift gasp, his mind rocking with shock and fear. Cautiously he opened them a slit, peering down, fighting back the terrible, age-old fear, and then slammed them shut again in a rush of vertigo.

He was standing on the top of a thousand-foot pinnacle!

Instantly he fell down flat, gripping the smooth edges of rock with a desperate grip. The section of that flat rock on which he stood was the size of a coffin, six feet long and three wide. Above him was a cool, blue sky with fleecy white clouds. But on all sides, inches from where he stood, was a sheer, cruel, breath-taking drop to the pounding sea below.

A shadow passed over him, and he

glanced up, tense, fearful. High above he saw huge black wings, a long, naked red neck, cruel talons, black and shiny, and a hooked beak that glinted in the sunlight. A bird like he had never seen before, sweeping down toward him, then away, making huge circles in the bright blue sky. A bird far larger than he, with evil little button-eyes that stared down at him, unblinking—he sobbed, clinging for dear life to the rock, watching the bird circling lower and lower. Why? Why didn't they stop this torture? Why didn't they stop it, bring him back?

He sensed that the end was near—his strength was failing, his will was failing. Little streamers of hopelessness and despair were nibbling at his brain, despair in holding out much longer, despair that was almost overpowering—the fear of death which had sustained him so long. The bird was so low he could hear the hungry flap of its wings as the steel-tipped talons scraped nearer and nearer to his shoulders. He peered over the edge of the precipice, seeking some kind of descent, some toe hold, finding none. He *had* to get down, he could never fight the creature. He blinked down at the blue water so far below. To climb down would be imbecility. He could feel the shredded end of his arm, loose in the cloth of his sleeve. With only one arm to hold on with, he couldn't hope to fight off the bird, even if there were a way to climb down.

A steely talon ripped his shirt as the bird skimmed by, sending a stab of pain through him, crystallizing his mad idea into action. Such a sheer drop above the water *could* mean a sheer drop below its level. An impossible choice, but there was nothing else to do. Taking a gasp of air he edged to the rim of the drop, gathered his strength, and threw himself off into space—and pure hope.

The water struck with a horrible impact, driving the wind from him, but he fought desperately toward the surface with his good arm, waiting for release, his mind begging that they would now be satisfied, that now they would stop, bring him back, not make him take any more. Finally he broke surface, and then, quite abruptly, felt solid ground under his feet. Glancing

back, he saw that the pinnacle was gone, and the sky had turned a horrid orange-yellow color. Panting, his strength spent, he staggered up on the shore.

But the shore wasn't right. With a burst of anger he saw the fearful, distorted shore line upon which he stood, the sand under his feet writhing and alive as little wisps of it rose about his ankles, twisting them, as if to throw him down to his knees. Stars were blinking up at him from the ground, and great boulders of black granite scudded through the sky, whizzing past his ears like huge, unearthly cannon balls. The world was changing, turning and twisting into impossible shapes and contortions, and he smelled the dank, sharp odor of chlorine in the pungent air.

With a scream of rage he threw himself onto the writhing sand, pounding his fist against it in helpless fury, screaming out again and again. He couldn't stand it any longer, this was the end, he couldn't fight any more—They'd *have* to bring him back now, they'd *have* to stop—

A horrible thought split into his mind, bringing him to his knees abruptly. His eyes were wide, hollow-rimmed as he stared unseeing at the impossibly distorted landscape. Fear struck into him, deep, hollow fear that screamed out in his mind, a desolate, empty fear. Carefully he reviewed his ordeal, everything he had thought, and seen, and felt. For so long, he had been running, fighting—enough to satisfy any test, as much as he was humanly capable of fighting. To test his reactions, conscious and unconscious, his resourcefulness in the face of danger, his ingenuity, his resiliency, his fight, his drive, his spirit—they couldn't ask for more. Yet they still hadn't brought him back. Surely, if any human being had ever proved himself capable of surviving the fearful alienness of the stars and the worlds around the stars, he had proved himself.

*But they hadn't brought him back—*

The thought came again, strongly, growing into horrible certainty. He shuddered, a huge sob breaking from his lips. He knew, he was sure. He had been waiting, hoping, fighting until he had satisfied them and they would stop. But now he

saw the picture, from a different angle, with terrible clarity.

*They weren't going to stop. They were never going to stop subjecting him to these horrors. No matter how much he took, no matter how long he kept going, they would never stop.*

He had been fighting for a lost cause, fighting to satisfy the insatiable. And he could keep fighting, and running, and fighting, *until he toppled over dead.*

Anger broke through the despair, blinding anger, anger that tore at his heart and twisted his mouth into a snarl of rage. He had been bilked, fooled, sold down the river. He was just another experiment, a test case, to see how much a live danger-trained spaceman could stand, to be run to death on a treadmill like a helpless, mindless guinea pig—

For the greater good of humanity, they had said. He spat on the sand. He didn't care about humanity any more. To enable men to go to the stars! *Bother the stars!* He was a man, he'd fought a grueling battle, he'd faced death in the most horrible forms his own mind could conceive. He wasn't going to die, not in the face of the worst that Connover and Schiml and their psych-training crews could throw at him!

He leaned back on the sand, red anger tearing through his veins. It was his own mind he was fighting, these things had come from his own mind, directed by Schiml's probing needles, stimulated by tiny electrical charges, horribly real, but coming from his own mind nevertheless. They could kill him, oh yes, he never lost sight of that fact.

But he could kill *them*, too.

He saw the huge rock coming at quite a distance. It was black, and jagged, like a monstrous chunk of coal, speeding straight for his head, careening through the air like some idiotic missile from hell. With bitter anger Robert Cox stood up, facing the approaching boulder, fixing his mind in a single, tight channel, and screamed "*Stop!*" with all the strength he had left.

And the boulder faltered in mid-flight, and slowed, and vanished in a puff of blue light.

Cox turned to face the shifting, jungle-

like shore line, his muscles frozen, great veins standing out in his neck. It's not true, his mind screamed to him, you can wake yourself up, they won't help you, but you can do it yourself, you can make it all go away, *you yourself can control this mind of yours—*

And then, like the mists of a dream, the world began fading away around him, twisting like wraiths in the thin, pungent air, changing, turning, changing again, as the last of his strength crept out of his beaten body, and his mind sank with the swirling world into a haze of unconsciousness. And the last thing he saw before blackout was a girl's sweet face, tearful and loving, hovering close to his, calling his name—

He was awake quite suddenly. Slowly, he stared around the bright cheerful hospital room. His bed was by a window, and he looked out at the cool morning sun beaming down on the busy city below. Far below he could see the spreading buildings and grounds of the Hoffman Medical Center, like a green oasis in the teeming city. And far in the distance he saw the gleaming silver needlepoints of the starships that he knew were waiting for him.

He turned his face toward the tall, gaunt man in white by his bedside. "Paul," he said softly, "I came through."

"You came through." The doctor smiled happily, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"But I had to terminate the test all by myself. You couldn't have stopped it for me."

Schimpl nodded gravely. "That was the last step you had to take, the really critical step of the whole test. I couldn't have told the others about it, of course. They'd never have let me start the test if they had known. Connover wouldn't even stick with the part that he'd agreed upon. But without that last step, the test would have been worthless. Can you see that?"

Cox nodded slowly. "I had to rise above the physical reaction level, somehow, I had to force myself—"

"There's no way for us to know what you'll find out there, when you go." Schimpl said slowly. "All we knew was what the others found, and what it did to

them. They couldn't survive what they found. But we knew that training in re-active, fight-or-flight level of response to danger wouldn't be good enough, either. You would have to have razor-sharp reactions *plus* full rational powers, even at the very end of your physical rope. We *had* to know that you had that—" He reached over to inspect Cox's bandaged head for a moment, his fingers infinitely gentle. "If the horrors you faced had been fakes, to be turned off when the going got tough, you wouldn't have been driven to that last ebb of resourcefulness that will save you—when you go to the stars. That was the final jump, the one the others didn't realize—that you had to discover, finally: That *we* weren't going to help you; that if you were to be saved, ultimately, it *had* to depend on you and you alone. You see, when you go where the other starmen went, no one will be with you to help. It'll be you and you alone. But whatever alien worlds you find, you'll have a strange sort of guardian angel to help you."

"The training—"

"That's right. Training on an unconscious level, of course, but there in your mind nevertheless, a sharpening of your senses, of your analytical powers—an overwhelmingly acute fight-or-flight sense to protect you, no matter what nightmares you run into."

Cox nodded. "I know. Like you called it, at the beginning of training—a sort of a brother, hidden, but always there. And this testing was the final step, to see if I *could* survive such nightmares."

[Continued on page 64]

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# FOR THE GLORY OF AGON

By IRVING COX, Jr.

*The essence of dictatorship is not merely that no citizen trusts any other nation; it is that no citizen trusts any other person whatever. Somehow break that mutual distrust, however.*

IN the red glare of the late afternoon sun they turbed away from the pioneer settlement, cut in the red soil of the desert. Brad headed the triangular-winged car toward the dome of the Earth colony which gleamed iridescently on the far horizon. He pulled his oxygen mask over his face, while the Martian watched him anxiously.

"Their story makes sense," the Martian said. He spoke slowly and precisely; his voice was soft and high-pitched, as delicate as his slim, wispy, six-armed body.

"They could be lying, Ran," Brad answered.

"They've been Rationalized!"

"Two hundred thousand of them? Six months ago they invaded the Solar Federation; now they're a member colony. Ran, the Rationalizer can't cure every—"

"The Rationalizer isn't a cure; it's not a machine, Brad. It merely persuades rationally thinking people to think rationally. The three hundred haven't escaped; they've simply taken one of their own ships and—"

"Which was prohibited when they surrendered."

"... And gone back to Agon to arrange a treaty. That's their story, Brad; it's true because it's logical. We've converted them to our way of thinking. Why shouldn't they want to take our technology back to their own people?"

"On the other hand, how do we know they haven't simply gone to explain the way we made them surrender?" Brad laughed, but without pleasure. "That surrender was a trick. A bluff! We don't have a weapon that could stand up against theirs."

"No. Nothing but civilization."

"You Martians are all alike. I suppose you'd turn back your enemies with a book

of sonnets, or a nicely pointed dramatic oration. You can't answer a technological development like their time-power with a handful of fancy words."

"Granted, their material technology outstrips ours; we've never built a Solar ship that could reach the stars and the Centaurians have discovered time-power. They attacked us with weapons that could wipe out a planet. Still, Brad, three Earth-people forced their fleet to surrender."

"Fortunately. It gave us a breathing space—time to prepare for their next attack. And what do we do? Waste it studying their culture, when we should be building weapons!"

"Brad, if we sacrificed all the resources on all our planets, we still couldn't build a war machine to equal theirs. The Solar Federation wasn't built on force. If we take our solution to the problem, we'll betray ourselves defending ourselves."

"More Martian double-talk. What do you want us to do? Sit and talk while we wait for them to come again? When I make my report to the Assembly, Ran, I intend—"

"At least consider the data I've collected, Brad." The Martian put two of his arms on the younger man's shoulder, in the traditional Martian gesture of friendship. "You've only gathered information about their ambassadorship; you need my data to fill out the picture."

"Ambassadorship! I dare say the motives of our Centaurian colony were logical enough. The trouble is, Ran, their rationalization may destroy us. As long as the Centaurians didn't know why their first invasion fleet surrendered, they hesitated about sending in the second team. How could they be sure we weren't better armed? Now these three hundred starry-



eyed ambassadors run home and tell the truth! The rest is inevitable."

"The Federation will still defeat them," Ran declared quietly.

"The first surrender was a fluke. We succeeded because they were foolish enough to allow three Earth-people to approach them with the Rationalizer. This time they'll keep their distance and lob death at us from somewhere out in space."

The turbine car slid smoothly into the landing flat. Brad and Ran entered the dome of the Earth-colony through the public vapor germicider. In the reconstructed atmosphere of the city, Brad removed his oxygen mask; the fragile Martian slipped a filter over his gill disk to reduce his intake of air to the less heady Martian mixture.

Ran went to his apartment in the second-level Martian sector; Brad took the lift to the top level of the city, where the luxury hotels were built on winding boulevards beneath the transparent city dome.

Brad was traveling on a Governmental Institute expense account, or he could not have afforded a suite in the Royal Martian. Ran could have been there, too, but he preferred the comforts of the Martian sector when he was on his native planet. No other Institute would have provided luxury accommodations, but the Governmental Institute was the oldest of all the Agencies and its standards were thoroughly encrusted with the diplomatic heritage of the past.

As the blue, plastic door slid open before Brad, the telescreen began to flicker insistently. He snapped down the recognition lever; the thin face of the Martian operator came into focus.

"Mr. Howard Brad?"

"Speaking."

"We have an Earth-call, Mr. Brad."

"Put it through."

Brad dropped on the arm of a lounge and pulled out a cigarette, while he watched the six-armed dexterity of the Martian operator. Brad was still a young man, tall, slim and intelligent. His face mirrored a deep-seated conscientiousness and the harassed frown of a man who had

successfully completed the tortuous training of the Governmental Institute. High cheekbones and dark eyes gave his face a slightly Oriental appearance; his thick, wiry mass of yellow hair clung like an unkempt crown to his head.

The rectangular view of the Martian transmission station faded from the screen and Brad looked into the Communications Center of the Assembly building in London. A young under-secretary addressed him.

"Is your report completed, Brad?"

"I can give you an interim, but I'd rather—"

"We want a full official."

"In person?"

"Tomorrow. We're calling in both you and Ran. You're scheduled to address the Assembly tomorrow afternoon."

"You'll notify the Martian?"

"There's a call in for him; he'll get it as soon as he comes in. You can both take the night sleeper, I think."

If Brad had not been so carefully schooled in the manners of diplomacy, he might have gushed his gratitude. Nothing could have suited his purposes better than this unexpected opportunity to appear before the Solar Assembly. He was well aware that the Assembly, staffed by senior diplomats elected out of the full body of Governmental Institute men, was an exasperatingly deliberate organization. It could seldom be moved to hasty action, even by an overwhelming array of specific social data.

And this was not the time for deliberation! Somehow Brad must find words to convey to them the sense of imminent danger that he felt himself; somehow he must make them see that this foolishly idealistic ambassadorship of the Centaurian colony had destroyed the Federation's only defense.

Brad dialed a light supper, which a silently efficient hotel robot served in his room. The food Brad ordered was a sweet, synthetic protein, which his body could convert into energy within half an hour. It was the prescribed pre-flight meal, designed to mitigate the acceleration nausea. Brad swallowed the gelatine with a frown of distaste; he had never become used to

it, in spite of the many flights he had made as a diplomat of the Institute. It was currently rumored that the acceleration sickness would disappear when the time-power used by the Centaurian ships had been adapted to Federation designs. That day could not come too quickly for Brad.

He was pulling on his light, rubberized flight suit when Ran knocked on his door. They turbed to the Interplan Port together. The Martian was wearing a plastic shell which preserved around his flimsy body the atmosphere and pressure of Mars. The scores of intricately engineered joints in the protective shell were powered by tiny motors which adroitly assisted the Martian's muscular movements when he entered the crushing gravitation of Earth.

Brad and Ran took the mid-section compartment in the commercial cruiser, a space always reserved for Agency personnel. As soon as the ship was in free flight, Brad lay back on the cushions, bracing his body against the encroaching nausea of weightlessness. He took a deep breath and gulped a Pepperwood capsule.

Ran settled slowly on the edge of Brad's lounge. "Brad," he asked, "do you still intend to ask the Assembly to arm the Federation?" His voice rang hollowly as it was transmitted through his plastic face mask.

"Of course."

"It's already too late."

"You're a defeatist, Ran. Look at the gadgets we've built for our comfort! If the Federation can just convert that same energy to making weapons—"

"And, if we do, we destroy ourselves. Brad, you've never taken the time to look at the social data I've assembled on Mars; let me show it to you now."

The Martian opened a small box and took out a Primary Teacher. It was a commonplace device, used by all the Institutes for basic teaching to children before they had learned the semantic symbols. Based upon the Series 600 Calculator, the machine projected on its miniature screen idea-pictures derived from any symbol context fed into it. For an initial education it was an ideal

device, automatically weeding out and discarding all linguistic abstractions. When the machine was used consistently by a very young child, the child subconsciously learned to read all semantic symbols in the same manner.

Into the Primary Teacher Ran fed the transcript of the testimony he had assembled at the Centaurian colony on Mars.

"Many of the questionnaires I submitted to our colonists," the Martian explained, "contained a number of subtle inquiries about their Empire and the everyday lives of their people. When we collate the answers and arrange the information in a logical sequence, we get—" Ran gestured toward the screen. "See for yourself, Brad. Remember that the language symbols of the Agonians will be automatically translated into our own Basic, because the questionnaires were answered in our language."

On the small screen of the Teacher Brad saw a stylized, astrogeographical view of the Agonian Empire, the nine inhabited planets of Alpha Centauri. He saw the tremendous, time-powered cruisers moving on scheduled runs between the nine worlds; the chains of sky freighters carrying raw materials; and the endless squadrons of armed battle cruisers policing the heavens. This last was an uncomfortably disturbing phenomenon, for the number was countless. Only seven police ships patrolled the entire Solar Federation.

The first picture dissolved and Brad saw the central planet of Agon, and finally the sprawling streets of the Agonian capital. It was not the gay, light, domed city of the Federation, but a bleak, filthy place, choked beneath a pall of industrial smoke. The buildings towered high above narrow streets, in an unplanned confusion, and everywhere Brad saw teeming mobs of people moving sluggishly, like animated machines. The gray and black tunics they wore were suitable companion-pieces to the dismal factory rooms where the Centaurians worked.

"But, Ran!" Brad whispered. "They do the labor themselves. They have no robots!"

Ran said nothing. The pictures wound on. Brad looked into the interiors of the

clifflike rooms where the Agonians ate and slept, dimly lighted, poorly furnished dens. The walls were blank and stained. The food was sparse and unattractive. Nowhere was there anything which his Earth-trained eye would have identified as beautiful.

In the next series of frames, Brad saw the gigantic capital of Agon at night. Even then the sluggish millions swarmed in the streets. And throughout the night the machines ground and clattered in the vast, dirty factories. Signs flashed in the smoky sky from towering buildings. Several were single-word admonitions to "Work!" Others became more specific, "Work for the Glory of Agon." Over the factory workbenches Brad saw the same monotonous slogans endlessly repeated.

On the outskirts of the bleak city were the vast military establishments, the barracks of the planetary police crowded close to the training fields of the space school. Squads of men were drilling smartly, wearily, without relief and without repose.

"Apparently, they have no robot infantry, either," Ran said.

The picture slid together in a whirling montage, as identical scenes were repeated on all the other planets of the Agonian Empire. Then Brad saw thousands of Centaurians toiling in the underground mines torn in the earth, others grubbing in the bleak fields. All the mineral resources, all the physical resources, all the mental resources of a complex planetary Empire—all the rich potential of a solar world—were channeled finally into a single creative outlet, the great industrial plant which made up the city.

And the end product was armament.

The final series of pictures portrayed the rulers of the Empire, the High Council of the Agon Class. Even among the aristocracy Brad saw no evidence of an advanced consumer technology. The wealth and the genius of Agon flowed only into its military machine; nothing remained to satisfy even a minimum of creature comforts.

As the pictures flashed out, Brad said, "So much military strength! Are they

afraid of an attack? Some unknown enemy more terrible than the Agonians themselves?"

"I found no evidence in my interviews."

"Then this High Council of theirs uses the enormous police power to keep the people enslaved!"

"No, Brad. There is no sort of opposition on Agon to the rule of the Council. The people accept it because they always have. They know nothing else. Agon has always been an aggressor; they've never lost a war. The Empire began on the planet called Agon. They gradually conquered the other habitable planets in their system and wiped out the native species before planting Agonian colonies. That seems to be what they mean to do here. We're their closest star neighbor and, after they had discovered time-power, I suppose they began to look around for new worlds to conquer."

"Why, Ran?"

"I'm not absolutely sure; but I think I can make a good guess. Once, long ago, aggression solved a problem for them. It worked. They've never tried anything else. Aggression has become a mass psychosis with them. The act of violence is its own reason and its own end."

"You admit that, and still tell me the Federation doesn't have to arm itself? Ran, we've got to make the Assembly understand! If they vote immediate emergency measures to create a military defense—"

"You saw the Agonian arms, Brad. We couldn't duplicate them in a decade."

"We have to try, Ran!"

"We can never defeat them, if we fight on their terms, Brad. But if we can engineer them into fighting on ours—"

"Are you going to show this reconstruction to the Assembly?"

"Yes."

"I thought you disagreed with me!"

"I do. Military action won't save us."

"But if anything can stir the Assembly into facing the facts, this is it."

The Martian laughed. "Oh, yes; the conclusion is self-evident. I didn't think you'd see it so quickly, Brad. Your fear of another invasion has seemed to blind you to the obvious facts. Congratulations."

Brad found it a discomfiting answer. Of course the facts were obvious! But somehow Ran's tone suggested typical Martian double-talk, a mocking, almost derisive sham of innocent agreement. Brad tried subtly to pry something that would be specific. But the subtlety of an Earthman was child's play to a Martian's teasing torments of verbal logic. Brad got nowhere. After half an hour of inconsequential sparring with abstractions, Ran curled up on his cushion and went to sleep.

Early the following afternoon the cruiser grounded on the landing flat north of London. Brad and Ran chartered a robot turb which, in three minutes, took them through the public vapor germicider into the gleaming dome of the Federation capital.

Unlike all the other cities, London had only one level, a carefully landscaped pattern of white marble buildings erected on the banks of the Thames. In the blaze of disastrous atomic wars that brought Earth's medieval period to an end, the old London was leveled; on its site the new Solar capital had risen. The circular city was trisected by transparent walls which met within and above the central Assembly Hall. One third of the city was built for the Earth-people; one third for Martians; and one third for Venusians. In each section the atmosphere of the home planet was chemically reconstructed; and in each section were available the individual foods, plants and wild life which were characteristic of the three planets in the Federation. The Assembly Hall was similarly partitioned, so that representatives from the three worlds could meet and govern in physically comfortable conditions.

Both Brad and Ran were members of the Governmental Institute, classified as Diplomats. The full personnel of the Institute—which was the largest of the Agencies—was drawn in exactly equal numbers from each of the three member planets. The initial selection was made on a basis of a popular vote; but, as soon as a candidate was elected, he had to qualify for office by means of an exhaustive education in governmental procedure. The education extended over a

five-year period. Annually the ranks of apprentices were thinned as much as a third by the Fitness Evaluations. The vacancies were filled by candidates of the same planetary origin, so that the species balance was always maintained. Those who eventually met the qualifications earned the initial rank of Under-secretary, serving as glorified clerks in the London office for three additional years; after passing the Final Evaluation, the Under-secretary was classed as a Diplomat. He held that rank permanently. From the Diplomats the Five-Year General Elections selected, by popular vote, the three hundred Representatives who governed the Federation.

The prevailing attitude in such a government was its unhurried, restrained deliberation. The quiet calmness of the Diplomat-politician was so characteristic it had become the jump-off point for half the ribald humor in the Federation. London was a haven of peace, a Delphic Oracle—in terms of the scientific method.

Yet, when Brad and Ran entered the reception gallery of the Assembly Hall, they were caught in a bustle of excitement. Nothing in their training—nothing in governmental tradition—had prepared them for such an experience.

A scurrying under-secretary stopped suddenly in front of them.

"You're the diplomats just in from the Centaurian survey?"

"Yes," Brad answered.

"I thought I recognized the Martian. Have you heard the news?"

"No. Don't tell me the colony—"

"One of their ambassadors is back! They're still processing the first-contact recording up in Communications."

"What's wrong?"

"You . . . you'd better judge for yourselves."

Fearing, perhaps, that his emotionality had been an unwarranted breach of custom, the under-secretary quietly vanished in the moving throng. Ran and Brad ascended the broad, curving stairway to the Communications Center. There they found the Governmental Director himself—currently, an ancient Venusian who had already served four times as a represen-

tative. Stooped, heavily wrinkled, his dorsal scales faded with age, he turned and waved an affectionate greeting. But he was clearly very perturbed. His small face scales stood almost horizontal with anxiety, and his throat undulated nervously as he talked.

"You're Howard Brad?" he asked.

"Yes; and this is Ran. We were assigned the colonial survey."

"Glad you're back. The Assembly is waiting for your report. It may give us a clue . . . but you must have left Mars before you had the news! One of their ambassadors has come back."

"Only one?" Ran asked.

"The others are—" The director's rumbling, froglike voice choked and his face scales shook with grief. "So foolish a sacrifice! But they seem to have understood their own people very well. After the ambassadorship had landed on Agon, they sent their ship back into space for safety. One Centaurian was left on board. Under certain conditions he was to return

and warn us. Here, let me run through the recording for you."

The director turned the re-play dial and on the telescreen Brad saw the scene which had been recorded some hours before. It was the anxious face of a Centaurian, slightly distorted by spatial static. Behind him Brad saw the vague shape of the colony on Mars.

The Centaurians bore a remarkable physical resemblance to Earthmen. Their bodily structure was so similar that the Biological Institute suggested that the two species could interbreed. The chief difference was in size; the tallest Centaurian in the colony was not quite four feet tall. And the Centaurians had proved to be vastly adjusted to the thin, Martian atmosphere than to the heavier oxygen content of Earth air.

"I was asked to bring warning," the Centaurian said. His voice was guttural, the accent faintly metallic. "Our mission has failed. They questioned us until they knew why our first invasion fleet had sur-

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rendered. Then they executed the others by—"

The recording jumped and the director whispered, by way of apology.

"I had the details of the process edited out of the recording. It seems so lacking in dignity to preserve a permanent record of such barbarism."

"... And, when the proper signal was not given," the Centaurian went on, "I escaped. The Agonian Empire will attack the Federation. I am entirely certain of that. Otherwise they would not have Rectified our ambassadors so brutally. Once a decision is made, they act upon it immediately. The second invasion fleet may be no more than a half day behind me."

The director snapped off the machine. "Their fleet has already been sighted by our observatory on the Saturnian outposts." His ageing face shook. "It is only a matter of minutes, I think, before they'll attack us."

"Their strategy is clear," Ran said. "They know they were defeated before only because they allowed our people to contact them physically. They'll have to destroy us from space, where they can still be immune to Rationalization."

"And you said we needed no defenses!" Brad cried.

"Mere destruction?" the director murmured. "They could have no logical motivation for—"

"Of course not," Ran intervened. "They want conquest simply for its own sake. However, if they use spatial weapons, they'll make the planets uninhabitable, even for their own colonies. They would win nothing. And what they want from us—" Ran's voice came to a dead stop. He staggered weakly against the recording machine. "Their own colony! Of course! It's one factor I omitted. But we still have time enough, I think." He turned to Brad, putting two hands on his shoulder warmly. "Brad, go down to the Assembly and make my report for me, exactly as I did last night. They'll understand our position, I believe, and know the kind of action I would recommend."

"If they don't," Brad said through clenched teeth, "I can make it clear enough!"

"My dear friend!" the director exclaimed with alarm. "Such an emotive response! I don't think you quite understand—"

"Let him go," Ran advised. "His feeling is understandable and—"

"Understandable!" Brad nearly choked on the word.

"... And entirely harmless. If you need me, Brad, I'll be here with the director. There's a little matter of an emergency on Mars we have to take care of."

Brad entered the vast Assembly Hall through the Diplomat's gallery. The glass-walled room glowed with the warmth of subdued sunlight. Behind the transparent atmosphere walls the three sections of the Hall were crowded, and a debate was under way. But its subject matter nearly shattered Brad's sense of reality. A vicious invader was approaching the Solar Federation, and the governing body, with dignity and undisturbed poise, was discussing the appropriation for the summer water games on Venus!

In due course the item was tabled, and the Speaker introduced Brad. Coldly Brad gave a sketchy introduction of the colonial survey he and Ran had made. Then he fed Ran's social data into a Primary Teacher and jacked the projection into the master telescreen, which the obedient robot attendants had carried into the Hall.

When the projection was finished, Brad allowed for a brief silence—an eloquent silence, he thought—before he began the formal report. He knew exactly what he would say. The phrases were clear and compelling in his mind, polished by his depth of conviction. The enemy was at hand, true. Tonight, or perhaps this afternoon, the Agonians would hurl demonic fire at the Federation outposts. It was disaster but not defeat. The Federation was still large and rich. The technology which had created robots, calculators, the germ-free dome cities—all the gadgetry of civilization—could surely improvise some sort of temporary protection. A few of the citizens of the Federation would survive. Eventually they could strike back at the Centaurians and drive their invasion fleets from the sky; they could pursue the enemy to his own Empire and lay it waste.

The speech was clear in Brad's mind; it would have made an impressive oration. But he never had an opportunity to deliver it. He had somehow, miscalculated. His eloquent silence lingered a split-second too long. An Earth representative arose and asked for the floor.

"We are grateful to Diplomat Brad," he said, "for this insight into the forlorn sociology of our unfortunate enemy."

"Unfortunate?" Brad stammered.

"A sad people who have wasted themselves and their wealth in the pursuit of an illusion. They are like lost children, desperately in need of rational guidance."

Brad recovered from his first shock. "Pity no doubt demonstrates our own sophistication and enlightenment," he said dryly. "But it scarcely serves to turn back an invader. We still have time to do that! If we vote emergency military measures at once—"

A polite muttering fluttered over the audience. The Speaker perfunctorily banged his gavel for order.

"You are invited here to report data, Mr. Brad," he said, "not to propose a course of action."

"You must listen to me! This is not a thing we can discuss forever in our polite political vacuum. It means the end of—"

The gavel banged again. A Martian representative arose and said gently.

"Diplomat Brad, your intensity of emotional reaction is clear and, perhaps, even excusable. But you are thinking with your senses! Our Federation is built on co-operation, on a peaceful union of rational minds. Even if we could adopt the course you suggest, we would destroy the substance of our union in the process. No enemy can defeat us, Diplomat Brad; a rational people can be defeated only by itself."

"Words! That's all you're saying! Do we build a barricade of words over our heads when their fire rains down on London? Do we knock their ships from the sky with a few well-placed adjectives?"

The robot attendants had not yet removed the telescreen from the Hall. It began to glow suddenly, dissolving into a poorly relayed picture from Mars. Brad saw the red earth, churned up before

giant prongs of fire. He thought, for a moment, that he could identify the outline of the Centaurian colony; but it was gone in a mist of flame and dust. Above the din of destruction, he heard the voice of the Martian announcer.

"... First pictures of the Agonian attack. Curiously they have restricted their fire power to the colony of their own people, although the range of the attack may change at any moment."

Brad sank back against the wall. The voice ground on, but the words made no sense to him. The destruction, he knew, was only a foretaste of the final chaos; and still the Federation did nothing! The representatives sat impassive on their benches. And Brad's world was lost.

Abruptly the blaze of flame was gone. On the telescreen Brad saw a shattered landscape, vast square miles of Mars smoldering with the dying fire of eternal death. On the perimeter of the wound the ground was unharmed. Brad saw the gleaming dome of an Earth colony still standing untouched on the horizon.

The telescreen was suddenly torn by a flashing pattern of interference. The voice was cut off and another thundered into the Hall—a guttural, metallic voice, using the Basic Federation tongue awkwardly:

"In this way do we punish our traitors! This is a warning to you servile fools who call yourselves the Solar Federation. We are the men of Agon, and Agon is invincible. We have come as your conquerors. Take warning and meet our terms at once, or one by one your cities and your soil will be burned by our flame from the sky. For the glory of Agon!"

The screen went dead.

Doggedly Brad watched the representatives. Many expressed acute pain at the violent death of the Centaurian colony, but that was only the emotional reaction Brad could detect.

One Earth representative said:

"They'll want to make a treaty, naturally. It was implicit in the data Diplomat Brad presented."

"They'll probably try to seize our resources," another added.

"I'm not sure. They're still afraid to contact us directly."

"The whole thing hinges on the wording of the treaty. I suppose a Martian could be delegated—"

"Not a Martian treaty! Even an invader like the Agonians doesn't deserve such a punishment!"

Brad flung himself out of the Assembly Hall, overcome with disgust. The Federation was weak, a sham that could be swept into oblivion at the first threat of superior force. They would not attempt to defend themselves. They had no courage, no valor; nothing but an empty facade of pretty words. The children of such people—if any were permitted to survive—would have no glittering legends of bravery, no giant heroes to carry with them into the ignominious night of surrender.

No heroes! The structure of the Federation suited every potential of rational thought—but it created a society without greatness. The people of the Federation had chained themselves to oblivion by the logic of science. Courage needed the tinge of emotion, the kiss of irrational daring.

Brad went to his room, in one of the hundreds of barrack-villas built on the outer edge of London. Although it was late afternoon, the traditional tea-hour, that part of the capital was deserted; all the personnel of the Institute had gathered at the Assembly Hall to assist in the negotiations with the Agonians.

Negotiations, Brad thought bitterly. Not one man among them had considered physical resistance. They were terrified by a show of force, trapped by their softening cultural ideals.

With trembling hands, Brad penned his resignation from the Governmental Institute. That, he knew, would be more of a shock to the Assembly than the Agonian attack. No one had ever resigned from the Institute before.

Brad left the envelope on his desk and slipped out of the city. His mind was assailed by chagrin and shame. He could make no clear decision, except that he wanted to get away from the gemlike order of the city—the glitter that symbolized cowardice. He wanted to get away from rational beings, those sophisticates who were so unwilling to accept the

dangerous responsibilities of courage. If he could, Brad would have written his resignation from mankind itself.

He stumbled past the bustle of the landing flat, past the out-city settlement of commercial warehouses and processing plants, all busily serviced by corps of robot labor. Brad knew he was running away and he knew the gesture was futile, for ultimate escape was impossible. He was not merely withdrawing from a man-made Institute, but running from himself.

At dusk he halted in the shadow of a grove of trees close to a roadside tavern. The gleaming turbs of half a dozen vacationists stood on the tiny landing flat in front of the tavern. Within the building the telescreen danced with the pulsing chaos of the day's news.

The picture was beyond Brad's line of vision, but faintly, shattering the temporary peace of the grove, Brad could hear the voice of the announcer:

"... Yet the initial peace treaty will be concluded this evening. The Agonian fleet has made no new attack; only their own colony on Mars has been destroyed. The Agonians are still afraid to meet any Federation delegation directly; the lesson of the Rationalizer was well learned, apparently. The Agonians insist upon conducting the conference by remote control, which has led to some delay on methods of discussion—"

Brad turned away and ran again. He found himself on a thickly over-grown country lane which led toward the Thames. In the hardened mud of the road he saw occasional ruts still preserved, the last lingering relics of the surface cars which had been so popular before the turb was developed.

The winding lane, sweet with the scent of honeysuckle in the twilight, was vaguely familiar. Brad recognized it at last when he reached the river and saw the deserted, collapsing cottage clinging to the grassy bank.

In Brad's apprentice days he had often come here with Ran. They had found the cottage and they often used it for undisturbed study when they were preparing for the annual Fitness Evaluations. Many of their books and notebooks were still in the cottage.

Brad realized that he had unconsciously taken the old road, retreating from the crushing disaster of the present into the golden memory of the past. In his apprenticeship he had believed in the Federation, in the ideology which united the three planets. Now he wanted to find his old faith again—even though reality made that impossible.

He went into the cottage. With approaching nightfall, the spring air had turned chilly. Brad made a fire on the hearth and, by the light of the dancing flames, he began to leaf through the discarded books he and Ran had left in the cottage.

For a long time he lingered over the yellowing pages, so damp with mildew. He found the notes he had taken in the introductory class in philosophical history. Blazing across a page was a verbatim quote he had once copied down.

"The brave man is not he who feels no fear, for that were stupid and irrational; but he whose noble soul subdues its fear and bravely dares the danger nature shrinks from.—Joanna Baillie."

Furiously Brad threw the notes into the fire. He collapsed on a battered settee and wept—wept for himself and for man, who today had betrayed his heritage.

He heard a light footstep outside. He looked up and saw Ran at the door. The Martian held a small envelope. Very quietly he said.

"I thought I'd find you here, Brad."

"Leave me alone!"

"I brought you this." Ran held out the envelope. "Your resignation. I knew you wouldn't want anyone else to see it."

"How thoughtful of you! How wonderfully civilized!" Brad's grief fell away into an immense gulf of strangling bitterness. "You can watch a colony destroyed by our enemy, and still remember the fine points of governmental etiquette."

"But the colony on Mars wasn't destroyed, Brad—just the empty buildings. That's why I asked you to speak to the Assembly for me. It was one detail I'd overlooked. I wanted the director to use his emergency power to evacuate the Centaurians before the Agonians made their attack."

"So no one was hurt." Brad laughed. "To the last we hold to the nonsense of rationality! I'm sure the Centaurians will appreciate being saved from death—for slavery."

Ran put two hands on Brad's shoulders; Brad jerked away.

"Stop thinking with your feelings!" the Martian said sharply. "We've lost nothing except a few square miles of Martian desert, and the treaty has been signed. It is a Martian treaty, Brad. We've won the war."

Brad stared at the plastic face mask of the Martian, gleaming in the yellow light of the fire.

"We've won the war, Brad, by conceding all their demands—and suggesting a few concessions of our own."

"We win by surrendering?"

"We've surrendered only things, Brad; they've surrendered an idea—though they're not aware of it yet, and when they do understand it'll be too late. The solution was clear as soon as my social data was compiled. Consider the problem from the Agonian point of view. Their whole society is organized for conquest. Simply that; nothing else. You saw their slogans. 'Work! Work for the glory of Agon!' They don't promise their people comfort or booty. Nothing except glory—a totally abstract concept without any specific meaning."

"I realize they were afraid to land; we had a Rationalizer and if they contacted us directly, they would be persuaded to surrender," Brad admitted. "But how does that keep them from destroying us as they did the Martian colony?"

"Their technique has always been to take the planet and wipe out the native species. You saw how they built their Empire. In our case, if they destroyed one they had to destroy the other, too. They would end up with nothing—nothing tangible to satisfy the glory of Agon. That gave them their first new problem in centuries. They couldn't solve it. They're psychotics, Brad; and a psychotic has definite, self-imposed limitations upon his ability to improvise—to find new answers, when the old ones don't work. All the Agonians could do was vary the

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**ICS**

old technique a little and threaten us into capitulation."

"So they enslave us by remote control. I don't believe I'm quite civilized enough to see how that wins the war for us, Ran."

"I said we had made a Martian treaty, Brad. The only thing they could demand of us was raw material. We gave them the impression that our metals made impractical weapons. It seemed to explain—at least to their satisfaction—why we hadn't defended ourselves. But there's another kind of raw material that we can furnish them—labor itself."

"So we buy peace at the price of the dignity of our people!"

"No, Brad; they won't take slaves home to work in the Agonian factories. They're afraid of us, remember? Here in the Federation we'll do their work, and our labor is entirely robot labor. It costs us nothing in physical effort or ingenuity; and the Agonians have agreed to supply us with the raw materials. The Federation is simply their workshop, Brad. After this, they'll relax and use the products we create."

"And this you call a victory?"

"Consider their social pattern again. Millions upon millions of them work forever, day upon day, in their dingy factories. They have nothing else to fill their lives or give purpose to their existence. They labor for the glory of Agon. It is a sacred dedication; the labor is necessary for them to feel any sort of individual fulfillment. They don't know how to perform any other service to the glory of Agon." The Martian sighed unhappily. "Now we've taken over their jobs."

For the first time the bitter, twisted smile disappeared from Brad's face. He turned slowly toward the Martian, his eyes wide with amazement.

"My apologies, Ran! So we become their workshop, and take the purpose of existence away from untold billions of their people. We'll wreck their economy!"

"More than that, Brad—their social order. I wish we could have defeated them with less punitive measures. Only a thoroughly sane people could adjust to so sudden and violent a change, and the Agonians are psychotic. When the Empire falls apart, we might be able to pick up

some of the pieces and Rationalize them."

Brad took his resignation from Ran and tossed it into the dying fire. "As you said—it's a Martian treaty."

"The only thing we could do, on the basis of the social data. Brad, you were panicked by fear; and fear short-circuited your ability to think rationally."

"I've acted like the Agonians," Brad smiled. "If the emotional anguish I've been through were to happen simultaneously to an entire culture—" He shuddered. "It isn't going to be pretty, Ran."

"War never is—whether it's fought on their terms, or on ours."

Arm in arm they left the cottage and walked back the sweet-scented lane toward the Federation capital, talking and laughing together as they had when they were still Institute apprentices cramming for the Fitness Evaluations. Above them the stars rode bright in the evening sky. The sky itself was clear.

## NIGHTMARE BROTHER

*(Continued from page 53)*

"And you'll take it with you to the stars, the nightmare knowledge and experience. It's hidden deep in your mind, but it'll be there when you need it. You'll be the next man to go—you and your nightmare brother."

Cox stared out the window for a long moment. "Mary's all right?" he asked softly.

"She's waiting to see you."

Robert Cox sat up slowly, his mind clear in the remembrance of the ordeal he had been through—a hideous ordeal. Terrible, but necessary so that when he came back, he would not be like the others had been. So that men could go to the stars with safety, and come back with safety.

Slowly he remembered his anger. He gripped the doctor's hand, squeezed it tightly. "Thanks, Paul," he said. "If I come back—"

"You mean, when you come back," said Dr. Schiml, grinning. "When you come back, we'll all have a beer together. That's what we'll do."